A New Face

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/72121236.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Deltarune (Video Game)
Relationships:	Small Mike (Deltarune)/Reader, Battat (Deltarune)/Reader, Small Mike & Tenna (Deltarune), Elnina/Lanino (Deltarune)
Characters:	Small Mike (Deltarune), Mike Trio (Deltarune), Battat (Deltarune), Tenna (Deltarune), Pippins (Deltarune), Cat Mike (Deltarune), Elnina (Deltarune), Lanino (Deltarune)
Additional Tags:	Reader is gender neutral, Reader is a Pippins, reader is implied Canadian have fun with that, Fluff, Romance, Identity Reveal (eventually), mentions of Lightners but they're not in here, Tags will be added, Hurt/Comfort, Jealousy, we will see lots of Jealous Battat, Misunderstandings everyone stay strong, Elnina is like a big sister/mother figure, while keeping all her silly, she ended up becoming soo important to the story, I lied the fluff ran away for the last several chapters, if you like romantic tension well this is made for you, they finally fuck, vaginal sex soz it's easier for me to write, finally the comfort part of my tags comes back, battats just an idiot but he's always meant well
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-10-08 Completed: 2025-10-17 Words: 42,394 Chapters: 13/13

A New Face

by Battatat

Summary

You were brought to Hometown as a gift, and you got lost from your darkner companions, and ended up in TV world. It is overwhelming, bright, and so many new faces. The television is a bit scary to you, but he's kind and means well. So his assistant, his right hand man with the plan takes over in guiding you and training you.

Of course, feelings develop. And feelings are confusing, you will quickly learn. All while stranded from everything you know.

It only gets worse when Mr. Tenna decides to cast you all in a play.

Notes

Hello!!! I hope this is a good first chapter.

I am still feverish for more reader/small mike (battat), so here I am.

The reader, again, is a pippins, because idk they're just endearing to me! Deal with it!! I was very careful to not "Y/N" us, because that takes me out of immersion when reading, too.

A certain Small Mike (you know who he issss) takes pity on you for being another Different Pippins, new and disoriented. So he swoops in before anyone else can overwhelm you.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: New to TV World

You were Asriel's. You were a novelty gift for his board game campaigns. He collected dice - all sorts of colours, shapes, sizes, and so Kris and Toriel would pick out a new set to get him for Christmases and birthdays, you learnt. You were from a foreign set: a dark red die, with a subtle gold shimmer to your paint, produced somewhere far away. Your companions enjoyed the long journey, while you'd felt homesick. Regardless, you quickly became a favourite of Azzy's - he compared you and your companions to the apple shampoo he always smelt of. You shined with pride, and a desire to appeal to him, whenever his kind eyes landed on you.

Despite the long travel, the new home, your companions remained optimistic and happy. Even the dice Azzy didn't use as frequently were spoiled with attention, dusting, being taken out of their boxes to show off to friends. It was nice. You experienced many journeys alongside Asriel and friends in the company of his bedroom and living room, sometimes brought to school or friends houses, and carefully protected for the day - until you could be brought home again. You listened to many, many hours of campaigns. Fleshed out stories about monsters and dwarves and dragons and elves and swordfighting and magic. Knights and kings, sorcerers, orcs and demons. Sometimes, the teenagers would even scrounge cheap costumes for "special" games. It was thrilling! You were finally adjusting, and it reallt wasn't too bad. It began to feel like home. This was the life you were meant to thrive in!

However, good things don't last forever. Your life changed quickly when you'd fallen between the couch cushions during an energetic campaign in the living room. It was Asriel's last night home, and he was getting one game in before he would be gone. The rest of his die were all packed up, aside from your set. Kris hopped on the couch a bit too clumsily, and you, and only you, rolled out of sight at the sudden weight on the cushion moving you. Your body tumbled between the cushions, plunging you into a darkness away from your companions. You couldn't scream, you couldn't cry out for help, just helplessly felt yourself fall.

And so, you woke up alone. Away from your companions, forgotten to the light world.

Soft, ragged breaths escaped you as you tried to wheeze back to life, and cautiously opened your eyes. You were so, so sore.

Your eyes struggled to adjust. You were on a peach checkered floor, now facing a wall of green and blue adorned in stars and some hanging decorations you couldn't identify. String lights, maybe?

Where was this place? You sat up more, still sluggish. This was not the Dreemurr living room, this was not school or Asriel's backpack, his loving, fluffy face was nowhere in sight.

You turned to the sound of a concerned hum, and screamed.

A television. An absolutely massive television, with a robotic body that must be well almost thrice your size, stared you down. His case seemed crinkled where eyebrows normally would be, his long nose pointed at you and a simple concentrated pout on his eyeless face. He'd

been studying you carefully. He was just as startled as you were, apparently, because he fell backwards with a yelp at the sudden scream that ripped from you.

"W-WHOA! No need to shout!" He looked sincerely alarmed. Digital beads of sweat rolled down his screen, jaw slightly agape. Or whatever was closest to a jaw that a television screen could possibly have.

You scrambled away from him, eyes still locked on him. You felt like a tiny prey animal face to face with a bear - you certainly acted like it. Just who - and what - the heck was this guy?! He was MASSIVE. How he even get close to you without you waking up was beyond your comprehension.

Behind him stood a smaller man, donned in all black, save for white gloves and a red bow, and an unsettling, fake grin. He, too, lacked eyes. His grin shifted into a frown as your panicked eyes locked on him momentarily before your eyes were back to defensively darting between him and the behemoth television crouched in front of you. You kept slowly backing away.

"Boss, uh, I think you're scarin' them, shrink down a bit," the smaller man advised gently.

The television shrunk. "O-oh. Oh! Right. You're right. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." He shrunk more as he spoke. How... was that even possible?

The smaller man raised both hands, and slowly approached you. You froze.

"Hiya! I'm Mike, and this is our boss, Mr. Tenna! He may look imposin'," the TV behind him shrunk even more at Mike's words. "But he's a real good guy! A sweetheart, even! We aren't gonna hurtcha!" He tried to reassure.

You didn't respond, but he stopped a few steps away from you. He was definitely much closer to your size, and his voice was friendly with a slight drawl to it that you didn't fully recognize. He called himself Mike, and, looking closer at him, his head seemed to be a literal microphone. With a weird, thin combover.

"Are you new here, sweetie?" Mike asked.

"Yes..." the word came out slow and rough. Your throat was sore from all the dust you'd inhaled as you fell. "I'm... have you seen other Pippinses, like me, anywhere?"

Mr. Tenna, whose screen had gone black for a bit, suddenly flickered as he looked up.

"I saw this Pippins fall while Azzy was playing with Kris and some friends... But he just left for college, earlier... he likely brought the others with him." he volunteered to Mike.

Your heart sank. Your fear of these two overpowered your grief at being left behind. You tried to steel yourself, in hopes they don't see any more vulnerability than they already have.

"Is that so?" The microphone mused. He put a hand on his chin, and the other now rested on his hip. He pretended to dramatically look at Mr. Tenna, then back at you. Could he even see you? Your claws dug in as you clenched your fists, worried despite them having made their

intentions clear: they meant no harm. Still, you were in a new enviornment, with two strangers cornering you. You knew, deep down, running away was likely hopeless. You had no idea where you were and if these people could be trusted.

"Would you like to work for me? At least until you can reunite with your family?" Mr. Tenna asked. His voice was fuzzy with the static of an old television, crackling with a cautious friendliness. He seemed very careful to not scare you again.

"Well, of course, they'd have to," Mike laughed. "We can't just let anyone coast on our couches for free! This Pip can be a stagehand, I'll train 'em." He spun on his heel to look directly at his boss. "But that means I might be too busy to be comin' to your rescue all the time, bossman," he teased, wagging his finger. "But I'll have this one running around, fully trained in no time!"

"Oh, Mike~!" The television sang. "You are such a hard worker! I understand!" His cheeks tinted pink as he grew a bit in size. How the heck was he doing that? He turned to you again. "I'm so sorry I frightened you, little Pippins!" His screen brightened, and a wobbly, dorky smile spread across his face. "I truly meant no harm! You will be taken care of here!"

Mike turned back to you, his smile wider. "I'll show you around. I'll meet you back at your office later, boss."

You let yourself finally relax a little.

TV world, as you knew it, was massive.

Mike weaved you through long corridors, opening almost every door to show you supply closets, bathrooms, stages, broom closets, a breaker room, the bar, the cafeteria, Mr. Tenna's office, the ranked rooms, the Green Room, the News Room, long hallways filled with dozens of stacked screens constantly broadcasting shows - you learnt quickly that the expressive, towering CRT man was very important. His eyeless face was everywhere, always plastered with dorky smiles and words of encouragement. Your head spun with all of this new knowledge. It'd take weeks before you memorize the place. Some doors were forbidden for you to enter - not that you planned to, anyway.

You jumped when a shadow gently brushed past you with speed you couldn't help but feel unsettled by.

"It's okay," Mike put a hand on you reassuringly. "That's just a Shadowguy. They're all friendly. They're kind of goofy and mischevious at worst. But they can't talk."

"They can't talk?"

"Nope!" He popped the 'p'. "They speak in saxophone sounds, trills and screams. Careful not to startle 'em!" He wagged his finger and laughed. "They're all approachable though."

The Zappers intimidated you, but again, Mike was quick to assure you when he saw you shrink at their imposing size.
"They're kind of like our security guards," he'd explained. "They're not supposed to be friendly with Pippinses, because TV World Pippineses are usually troublemakers... but they're always friendly, anyway. I doubt they'll give ya any trouble." He beamed. If he could wink, you were certain he would.

The Weather Duo, Lanino and Elnina, immediately adored you. "You're like a brilliant sunset," the moon cooed. "You have the smile of a sweet breeze," the cloud sang. She tried to pinch your cheeks, but you'd ducked away. She took no offense to it, provided you'd blushed brilliantly at her touch. The duo were incredibly doting. Both to each other, and you, but you got the feeling they thought of you like a cute cat or something.

Once a Pippins spotted you, it was over. Multiple seemed to jump out of nowhere - all eager to study you. They showered you with questions.

"Where are you from?"

"Why's your uniform such a shiny red? Did you fall in glitter?"

"Do you like men? Or women? Do you like both!?"

"Are you good at poker?"

"When did you get here?"

"What sorta booze you like?"

"What's your sign?"

"Why do you smell like maple cinnamon?"

"Are you into gambling or RPGs-"

Mike put himself between you and the gathering crowd, his voice booming a bit louder than you were used to.

"Guys, guys! Give 'em some room! Jeez! Ask our new friend questions one on one! But not while I'm givin' a tour!"

Mumbled apologies and curious murmurs replaced the barrage of questions as Mike turned toward you again, awkwardly scratching the back of his neck.

"Well, you're certainly a hit among the other reds," he sheepishly said. "They're not bad. They're just... eager to make friends."

He grabbed your small hand and lead you away.

His voice was a bit more hushed, sympathetic this time.

"Some folks think the Pippineses here are all shitheads, or like a hivemind, but they're a common set in a box under the television in the light world. They don't see rare colours as often. Different is a novelty. I know it can be a lot. Don't let it scare you."

You simply nodded and mumbled a "thanks, man." As he guided you to the elevators.

"These are residential floors," he stated, pointing out floors 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. "Pippinses are on floors two and three. Shadowguys are floor four, Zappers and Shuttahs are on fifth, Mr. Tenna, myself, and the Weather Duo are on the sixth floor, the apartments there are much bigger. Seventh floor is just an extra penthouse for the boss. I'll show you your room."

On floor 3, the doors opened. He gave you a quick motion to follow him, as he lead you down the hall. The hallway decor was nice. It wasn't adorned in bright colours or stars, but warm, darker tones with amber lights. It made you think of a nicer-end lodge or something - the design made you feel as though it were intentional so employees can begin to simmer down from a busy day as they made their way to their rooms. "Do I share a room, or...?" You squeaked.

"Hmm... if you want a roommate, sure, we can arrange it." He handed you a set of keys. "I figured you'd want privacy. I know I did when I was new here."

"I'd like privacy, a-at least for now... sorry if it's dumb to ask, but you were new here?"

"Long story, I don't wanna explain it," he sounded a bit nervous. "But yes, I was new here once. Even Motormouth Mike can be a newbie. I'm always a bit sympathetic to new joins, because this place can be..." he thought for a moment. "... a lot."

You didn't respond with more than a nod as you tentatively reached past him to unlock the door. You carefully swung it open. Mike leaned past and reached inside, hand fumbling for the light switch before finally finding it.

The lights flicked on, and you gasped.

It was a gorgeous little room. It was a studio apartment, already furbished (thank god). Mike walked past you inside and you quickly followed to eagerly take in your new home. Temporary or not, this was nice. The furniture wasn't anything high end - it looked comfortable. Lived in. Which was just what you needed.

A small entrance way by the front door, a humble but clean kitchen, and a bathroom door just past the kitchen area. Instead of a table, there was a kitchen island with two stools. A couch, and a coffee table facing a flatscreen hanging on the wall beyond that, and a bed toward the far back. You could see a door - presumably a closet? - on the wall across from the bed. But the most enticing part, to you, was the curtains lining the whole wall to the side of the bed.

You made your way through your new home, careful not to touch anything, until you reached the curtains. You looked to the sides for a drawstring, and- yes! There was one!

You pulled on it, curtains moving to reveal the dark world beyond your room. You let out a soft gasp. The sky was black, the ground below was an endless stretch of snow. The

twinkling skyline of a city stood in the far distance, certainly not close but enough to notice. Snow fell from the endlessly stretched abyss of a sky. The view was so serene, so peaceful, it stirred something nostalgic and warm inside you.

You didn't notice the hot, wet tears until Mike commented on it.

"No need to cry, haha. It's not that bad, really! TV World is a bit colder, but we have good heating-"

"No! No." You turned quickly, wiping your face with your red velvet glove. "It just... it reminds me of home." Your lip quivered. "I came from a very snowy place."

You shuddered and hugged yourself. "A day ago, I was with my family. Carried around by Asriel. And now I'm suddenly here. And I have a new apartment, working for a huge robot and so many new faces, and I'm glad everyone is friendly, but I just. I still. I'm alone. It's just..." you looked back outside. "It's a lot to take in."

Mike didn't speak for a moment, but he slowly made his way to you. He opened his arms in a silent offer. You accepted and wrapped your arms around his plush body. "I'm sorry for crying," you hiccuped into his suit, fighting to keep yourself from stuttering. "I'll be fine. I'm just scared."

"There, there." He cooed quietly. "I know."

You two stood like that for a few moments, before he gingerly shook himself loose.

"I gotta run, you make yourself at home. I gotta report to bossman every night." His smile twinkled. "Everything's gonna be okay. You'll make it."

You nodded and inhaled shakily. "I'll do my best. I'm all-purpose," you joked.

"And all-purpose pips are the best pips! Don't sweat too much on this gamble, sweetheart, you'll fit right in tomorrow. I'll make sure it's as smooth as possible for you." He chuckled as he made his way to the door. You stayed put, watching him make distance between you two.

"Goodnight," you said, so softly you weren't sure he could hear you.

"Goodnight, sweet dreams!"

And the door was closed.

You turned back to your room, your head now spinning. What the hell was today?

You decided to take a few minutes to nosey around your place a little. You'd never had your own space before! You checked the bathroom first. There was a mirror above the sink, and you could see you looked like a bit of a wreck. Nothing some sleep couldn't fix. You had just a toilet and a small shower, and some storage room beneath the sink.

You wandered out to the main room, before deciding to check the kitchen. That fridge was at least a foot taller than you. If it wasn't pre-stocked in your bizarre new home, you'd complain

for sure.

A smile flashed across your face as you peered inside. Water, sodas, there was some fruits inside, cheeses and in the freezer, you were greeted with a small stack of frozen TV dinners, lasagnas, and some other bags you couldn't be arsed to examine anymore. You had food, it wasn't expired, that was all you needed, this was satisfying enough. You grabbed a water bottle and checked the cupboards.

Boxes of pasta, bottles of sauces, non-perishable foods... nothing super fancy, but at least you could enjoy food here. You'd have to thank Mike and Mr. Tenna for that, later.

You meandered towards your bed, finally giving up and surrendering for the night. You kicked off your shoes, but decided to keep your cloak on as you gingerly pulled back only one layer of blanket.

Your coat still smelt of home, and home you would dream of as you slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter 2: The man in green

Chapter Summary

> You finally get fo meet a side of Mike you didn't expect! And you meet another pippins, both unlike yourself, but also very like yourself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Your morning had been off to a rocky start.

You'd woken up late, brushed your teeth, chugged some water and off you went running. You weren't really sure where you were supposed to go, nor had anyone told you. So your goal was to find Mr. Tenna or Mike. You knew you were supposed to start training as a stagehand, but you'd already gotten lost.

You stumbled into the Green Room, frantic and helpless, when the barkeeper spotted you.

"Stages are down that hall, luv." He motioned with his hand and you scrambled a thank you as you ran in the pointed direction.

You got to the doors, steadied yourself as best as you could, and opened them.

Surely enough, Mr. Tenna was just offstage, bemding over to speak with Mike, who'd been pointing at papers with Mr. Tenna's full attention.

The sound of you having opened the door caused Mr. Tenna's antennas to twitch, and he perked up at the sight of you.

"Ah! There you are!" He clapped his hands once in delight. "Mike, your trainee is here!"

Mike had already been turning toward you, grin growing wider. "Hey-ey-ey! How'd ya sleep?"

You'd finally steadied your breathing, mustering a smile. "I slept so well, I was worried I'd be late," you chuckled breathlessly.

"Hah! Well, you made it just in time! Mr. Tenna's about to go up!" Mike puffed his chest proudly. "I'll show you what to do from here."

It wasn't too bad, really. A bit flashy and bright but Mike kept you mostly backstage, helping put up sets and switch them out. He helped you navigate the prop room and costume rooms. "Here's where we have Tenna's extra coats and ties," he'd explained. "Sometimes they get... ruined... on set and we have to switch them out quickly." He also showed you a closet with brooms, mops, cleaning supplies and... a toolbox in the corner. "Just in case of emergencies - bossman's built of metal and wires, yanno, it's not often but accidents happen where we gotta fix him up."

He weaved you through the curtains and took you up to the sound room. It also doubled as a full control room - with buttons for all the stage lights, audio mixers, 2 small security monitors for backstage, as well as a bigger monitor showing the live feedback of the show. Wow. They really had everything going on. Mike had lead you back down the stairs and backstage when he got a call.

"Huh? Okay. Shit. Yeah, got it. I got someone with me right now." That last part came out as a hiss. "Yeah. Okay. I'll grab him. See ya."

He hung up, and looked at you guiltily.

"Hey, sorry but I gotta run! I'll be back. I'll send a guy to come help ya."

"Oh... okay." You tried not to sound a little worried. "I think I'm understanding everything." And it was true! Over the last few hours, you'd begun feeling like this could, at least, be a routine you could fall into while living here. Even if it was a lot to take in.

"That's great." He was backing out of the room. "You're already doing wonderful! I just got some duties to attend. Haha!"

And he was gone.

You frowned a little, not really knowing what you were supposed to do next. Everything seemed to be operating fine, but not wanting to stand idly, you went to help some Shadowguys as they were positioning podiums to prepare for a game show.

Mike was right. They were incredibly friendly. Some cheerfully patted your head and whistled quiet, yet cheerful saxophone toots at you in gratitude of your help. They clearly knew you were new, and they made it clear they were delighted by your presence. They moved frighteningly quickly, but they slowed down as they passed by you, as if they were silently trying to make sure you didn't get startled by them. You appreciated it. After you'd helped, something caught your eye - movement with a flash of red and white and black.

You turned, expecting Mike.

A dancing, wiggly cat stood nearby, goofily charading orders to the other Shadowguys.

Oh god. He was so cute.

You sped up to him almost unthinkingly - he blushed and leaned back, and as he drew them shyly to his face, you realized his paws were microphones.

"Mike?!" You gasped.

He nodded, batting pink and yellow eyes at you. He continued to playfully wiggle.

"Why are you in a cat costume?!" You couldn't hide the delight in your voice. "Is that on purpose? It's so cute!"

He was taller than earlier, you noticed, but he nodded again and wiggled his hips playfully.

"Why are you dancing?"

He pretended to think about it, before bringing his microphone paws to his face again. He crouched a little and offered his head to you.

"I can pet you?? You want me to?" You were taken aback - not in a negative way, of course. He was acting and looked incredibly cute. But this couldn't be the same charming, chatty, chubby guy supposed to be training you.

He nodded again, emitting a musical purr. He closed his eyes in anticipation.

You put your gloved claws over his cheeks and then gently scratched him. His musical purr grew louder. You giggled and whispered, "is this even allowed?" He continued to purr and squirm so you could scratch alllll the good spots. Your cheeks were pink - this surely wasn't workplace appropriate. He was your manager. He was permitting - or, purrmitting, you thought amusedly - it! And he was clearly enjoying being a kitty, for reasons beyond you. Maybe this was just normal here.

"Ahem."

You jumped at the sound of someone's impatiently cleared throat, immediately distancing yourself from Mike.

Looking to see who made the sound, your eyes landed on another Pippins - clad in a forest green poncho and tie, holding a clipboard with a headset fitted on him. His eyes were half lidded in fatigue, with dark bags below them. He looked like he didn't sleep in weeks. He was about a couple inches taller than you, and clearly not amused. His face seemed flushed, as though he were secondhand embarassed by the cat-petting before him.

"Mike." He said firmly. "Stop getting the new hire to pet you. It's weird."

Mike slouched dramatically, and let out a long, sad trill.

"I know that... you like being a cute kitty sometimes..." he grit through his teeth, "but bossman wants you. Go see what he wants. Get out of here already."

Mike turned towards you, put his paws to his face one last time with a sweet trill, before he bounded off - scarily quickly - around the stage. Once he had passed the curtains, the Pippins spoke up again.

"Sorry about that. When he gets like that, he can get a little...." his mouth twisted into a green scowl. "Ridiculous. Only when he's in the cat costume, though. He's normal anytime else."

You nodded slowly. "I see! I was a little surprised... but he's supposed to be-"

"Training you," the green Pippins interrupted. "I know. I'm supposed to take over when Mike can't."

His voice was flat, cold, to the point. You shrunk a little, worried you were already in trouble with this Pippins. The only other Pippins who looked different here, and he seemed displeased about seeing you with Mike, and displeased about having to train you.

"Come with me." He stated, turning and stalking off.

You scurried after him as he took you back to the control room. "We have 3 hours left," he grunted, tossing a glance over his shoulder. "All we gotta do is sit around and occasionally press buttons. We Pippins are supposed to be able to do fucking everything well, so you will learn to do everything well."

You said nothing, and followed him obdiently.

You already missed Mike.

"My name is Battat." He said flatly after a while of sitting in the dark room with you.

"Uh... hi, Battat." You cautiously responded.

You tried to be as still as possible when he wasn't showing you what to press. You'd been working hard to memorize the buttons and dials, and earned the smallest of smirks from Battat when you'd correctly switch a light or adjust a dial before he could finish his orders. He seemed intent on rigidly making sure everything ran smoothly. You noted to yourself that this was the only unfriendly face you've met thus far. Maybe you could get on his good side if you try to do everything right. You were trying to self soothe with reminding yourself: this dark world was in Asriel's living room. You may not be home, but at the same time... you technically are home. So it'd be optimal to make the best of it. And that included getting along with the other darkners here, especially Pippinses like yourself.

"Are you..." you started, nerves clear in your voice, "allowed... to talk to the manager like that?"

"Are ya gonna report me?" He scoffed.

"N-no." You shrank.

"Only I really can." He spoke after a pause. "I know the guy well, is all."

You simply nodded and fixated your stare down at Tenna's beaming smile as he quizzed darkners below.

"So you're new."

"Yep."

"And you're different."

You stiffened silently.

"I'm not gonna bite," he sighed, reclining into his seat. "I'm just observing. I'm different, too."

He waved his hand down himself, as if you hadn't already seen him. He was handsome, in a ragged way, if only he didn't scowl so much, you thought to yourself.

"You want coffee?" He asked as he stood up.

"Uh... yes please," you responded meekly.

"How do you like it." It was supposed to be a question, but it came out so flatly.

"Two milk, two sugar."

"Okay. Stay put."

As soon as he was gone, you breathed a sigh of relief. You didn't realize how tense you were around this green Pippins until he'd left. What was his problem?! You felt frustration flare up... just to fizzle out. He looked tired. You'd probably caught him on a bad day. But his cold, uncaring demanour and abrasive speech had your nerves fried. Not that you expected everyone to be friendly, but you were still so new - the last thing you wanted were enemies.

He came back with two cups, re-examined both before handing you the one labelled "DD".

"Not sure what DD is," he said. "But it is probably yours."

"DD stands for double-double," you explained deferentially. "Like... two milk. So one double. Two sugar. Another double. Double double."

You felt a little stupid under his stare.

"Makes sense." He didn't linger on it. "Anything happen while I was gone?"

"Not really, Tenna's been doing some family feud type thing down there... so there's been no need for me to do anything yet."

He nodded, satisfied with this.

The rest of your new shift went by uneventful, much to your relief. Battat only provided dry commentary here and there, and would ask you occasionally to flick a button or dial just out of his reach. The tension, however, was palpable. His jaw remained taut and his shoulders tight the entire remaining hours with you. He'd bounced his leg impatiently for so long, you were certain the sound of his heel tapping would engrave itself into your brain.

"Will uh... you or Mike be with me tomorrow...?" You asked timidly before you left.

He slowly spun his chair to look at you, critically scanning you with his forest green eyes, before gruffly responding.

"I'll probably there in the morning. Got a complaint for not being here much."

"O-okay!" You squeaked before scurrying off.

As you made your way back, you kicked yourself internally. Why why WHY were you feeling intimidated! He didn't even say anything particularly scathing to you - just seemed overall in a pissy mood. But he didn't take it out on you. But he still could've kept his tone to himself! Nevertheless, he intimidated you, and that was that. You felt vulnerable in his presence. The next time you saw him, you were certain you'd make a good impression, at least, in hopes you could avoid his judgemental gaze.

You wandered back out to the Green Room. The bartender was there again, honed in on cleaning a single glass. Over and over. You considered pulling up to sit down, but you didn't get to linger long before the Weather Duo were suddenly on you.

"Oh, sweet red velvet!" Elnina cooed. She practically sucked you into her embrace. "How's working here? Is Tenna overworking you?"

"No, not at all!" Launched out of your thoughts, and now flustered by the weather duo, you thought to yourself that hopefully, over time, everyone gets used to seeing you. And behave normally about it.

"Tell them about the party, dewdrop!" Lanino sang excitedly.

"Oh!" Elnina clapped her azure hands to her cheeks. "Of course! Red velvet, darling! There is a party tomorrow after work! Nothing crazy, just a bunch of staff sharing food and drinks." She singsonged. "Will we see you there, dear? It's in the cafeteria!"

You nodded enthusiastically, blushing as you scratched the back of your neck. "I'd love to! I didn't even know there was one."

"Oh of course! We're thrilled to have you! Mr. Tenna might be there, too," Elnina giggled.

"He goes to staff parties?"

"Sometimes," Lanino laughed, "he's a real party animal when he's in a good mood!"

This was news to you. But it made sense. Sorta. He seemed like the larger-than-life type.

Out of the corner of your eye, you spotted green again.

"I- uh- I gotta go, though!" You sputtered to the sweet couple. "I gotta, uh, unpack! Get used to my room, y'know?"

"Oh!! Of course! Don't let us hold you captive, dear!"

"Sweet red velvet, we will see you again soon!"

Their friendliness was infectious, and truly you already began to adore the two.

But you had to get away from Battat's gaze. It felt stupid, wanting to squirm and writhe your way away from him, but you weren't sure how you felt about him, other than your stomach twisted suddenly seeing him again.

You could see his expression drop further, somehow, as you sped past.

Fuck.

You made your way to the elevator, frantically pressing the button, other hand clutched to your chest with your fingers crossed that he wasn't coming the same way. But you realistically had nowhere else to retreat to.

He stepped up beside you.

"Uh, I know I'm not on you top ten favourite Tenna staff," he said uncomfortably. "But I have to go to my room, too, y'know."

You anxiously sputtered out some lame excuse about just forgetting something in your room.

He shrugged slowly, and the elevator, the unpunctual bastard it was, finally creaked open.

That was the longest wait for an elevator you could imagine. And it felt just as painfully, dreadfully long as it slowly slid up to the Pippinses floor.

"OkaygoodnightBattat!" You said quickly, before speedwalking... in the exact same direction he went.

You didn't look back, otherwise you might've seen his resigned sigh, and feel more mortified.

You quickly unlocked your door, and got inside, careful not to slam it as you flicked on the lights. You felt incredibly stupid. There was no way he bought that. And now he definitely thought you were an asshole. For sure.

You leaned against your door until you finally slid down, shuddering out a sigh.

Maybe you were overreacting. Just a little.

He was cold, blunt, a bit abrasive. If looks could kill, he probably would've had you splattered against the wall several times during your shift. You genuinely couldn't tell if he

was constantly annoyed at you, or if he was just like that. But he looked so tired. You knew, deep down, people don't look that worn out for no reason. Maybe he was just going through his own battles, and here you were, making it about yourself, like some selfish little cretin. Maybe being away from everyone and everything you knew was just making you more sensitive to this new world than you'd like to admit.

A knock at the door caused you to shriek, and you lept out of your skin.

"Uh, not to frighten ya!" A familiar voice laughed. "It's me! Mike! I wanted to check in! I also got something for ya!!"

You scrambled to your feet and whirled around to open the door.

"Mike!" You exclaimed. The relief on your face evident.

"That's me! Good ol' Mike!" He chuckled. "I'm so sorry I couldn't be with ya longer today! Can I come in?"

"Of course! Of course! Please don't apologize," you reassured him. "Today went... well! Very well!"

"Was my replacement good to you?" He asked, seemingly more serious as he sat at one of the stools in your kitchen, setting down a box on the table.

"Ah... " you trailed off for a moment, before telling the truth. "I was a little intimidated. He's not bad or anything!! I just. He seemed very annoyed. I'm sure it wasn't at me. But I'm the anxious type." You opened the fridge. "Do you want a drink?"

"Anything's fine," he grinned at you. "Try not to mind Battat too much..." he played with his thumb as he spoke. "He can seem irate, but... I hope you don't think he's a bad guy. He's just shy."

"Shy?!" Your shock was evident.

"Y-YEAH," Mike scrambled a bit. "Some people show it weird! And he's very weird!! I was worried he'd give a bad impression, so I wanted to make sure you were feeling alright."

You slumped a bit as you sat beside him.

"No worries. I'm okay." You smiled at him. "I'm sure he's great. I'll make an effort to be more open minded. Even if he kinda scares me." You added the last bit with a playful elbow to Mike, and he seemed to relax at your reassurance.

"Good, good," he giggled. "I like knowing my trainee is taken care of!" He patted the box beside him. "Speaking of taking care of you... I hope these fit!"

"Oh!!" You were already thanking him as you reached over to look inside. Multiples of your shimmery, dark red poncho with its unique jagged red over black pattern, and a small bundle of matching folded scarves and gloves were folded neatly off to the side. You were proud of your design, it was how you were created, how you were envisioned by the lightner who

forged you. The black hood with faux fur lining the inside, the black trim all practically sang to you. The attention Mike paid to your details flattered you so. These were perfect replicas of your clothes, with meticulous attention to every detail. You didn't think words could justify how grateful you were.

"Mike, oh my god, thank you!! This is so sweet... and they look like they'll fit, perfectly! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"Anything for you." He grinned sweetly. His grin scared you yesterday, but now you found yourself feeling relief in his presence. "I wanted to make sure you had more than just one change of clothing... there's also pajamas in the drawers by your bed, fit for Pippins,"

"Gosh... you're so kind. Thank you so much..." your heart fluttered, before you remembered something you wanted to ask. "Also, Mike... not to change subject, or anything, but..."

He froze.

"What was with the whole cat thing? D-don't get me wrong, it was very cute-"

"Okay I'll be off! Thank you for having me! I just really like cats and I get really into cosplaying when asked to show up as a cat for the boss and and and," He scrambled off your stool and hastily made his way to the door.

You erupted in laughter, doubling over as he opened the door.

"Sleep well, I'm glad to catch up with ya! But now I'm going pleasedontmentionpettingmelaterimgoingtokillhim-" and the door was slammed.

You laughed alone in your room before popping one of those dinky frozen TV dinners in the microwave. It wasn't much, but it'd make for a meal tonight.

When you finally went to bed, your mind lingered on Mike's words.

Shy. Battat. Battat shy. Shy battat.

Crazy.

Maybe you'd make the effort, tomorrow, to bridge the gap, even if you were scared. It was only right.

You dreamt of cuddly cats, and flashes of green, feelings you couldn't identify.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was SOOOOO freaking long. I only proofread it once and wrote it throughout the day, taking more time on it. I think this is the longest thing I've written on AO3, if I measured by how many pages this took up on my notes app.

Battat is absolutely jealous of the attention Plues got today, and reader takes that personally.

Also: red velvet is NOT our name! We still are just nameless die #6942021 but red velvet is just a nickname we'll see pop up here and there, as characters observe us by our coat. We're so stylin.

Chapter 3: The accident

Chapter Summary

I did not sleep between this and the last chapter. Apologies for literally everything!!

You tapped nervously on the bleachers backstage with your claws as you sat alone, watching shadows phase in and out of vision as they prepared for the day.

Mr. Tenna had, as you learnt two days prior, set up audience bleachers so he could give presentations backstage.

Backstage was a pretty large room - lots of space for crafting, working on costumes, watching demonstrations and practice rehearsals. It felt something like a classroom, with black floors and walls, splashes of colour livening up the room. The floor had a sporadic "paint splatter" design - random tiny droplets of colour. The walls were black bricks with soundproofing mats on some walls. A corkboard near the door with posters, newsletters, and miscellaneous signs announcing meetings and movie nights littered it to the point you couldn't see any of the original corkboard below. A large desk, presumably Mr. Tenna's, was situated diagonally in a corner, facing the room, where he presumably watched rehearsals or sat when displaying presentations. You wondered if he held improv classes here. It seemed like the perfect room for it. You'd have to ask later.

You were waiting for Mike - or Battat, since he said he'd be here in the morning. This time, you were careful to actually be early. Thirty minutes early, even. If Mike came in first, you'd eagerly be his shadow. If Battat came first, well, you'd be stuck under his training. Though you took Mike's words into consideration. Maybe you could try to work through your intimidation.

To your luck, it was Mike - donning his cat costume. You shot him a giggly smile. He spotted you and emitted a playful trill, and bounded back over to you.

"You really do like the cat thing, eh?" You teased.

He nodded, and dramatically acted out a blush - kicking the floor while clutching his paws together, looking down bashfully then back up at you.

"Is there a reason you don't talk when you're a cat...?" You questioned, curious. "Everyone knows you're still Mike... is it just some kind of method acting...?"

He looked alarmed for a moment, before relaxing and nodding happily. He bounded over and planted himself next to you. He pretended to blush again before dramatically looking both ways, and leaned in for more scratches.

You giggled, he was so silly!

"You don't want Battat catching us again, eh?" You smiled sweetly at him.

He let out giggly trills, not unlike that of a Shadowguy's, and wiggled close to you. "Am I the only one who actually pets you?" He nodded again in response to you.

The door opened, and he practically leapt out of his cat costume and sprawled onto the floor, improvising the way cats roll on their back when happy.

Battat peered in.

He looked at you apprehensively, until his gaze travelled to the floor. His brows instantly furrowed in irritation.

"For the love of- get up. Stop harassing them. You know you have work to do," he scolded. "And you," his stern voice turned to you. "Today we are rehearsing. Boss wants us all in some stupid play. That might be all we're doing for the next week."

"Oh! That... sounds fun," you faltered. The idea really did sound fun. Just, too bad you had to quell your excitement in response to his pessimism. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad. Sure, it got in the way of your training, but you loved a good performance. After all, you were used in storytelling and tabletop campaigns before you'd fallen between the couch cushions.

"It's a romance," he stated flatly.

A small part of you imagined Mike as the lead role, and you as the secondary lead. Maybe he'd be your prince who found you in the woods, or maybe you his knight, protecting him from dragons of yarn... you waved away the thoughts frantically. No no no. No. Noooo. No. You could not think about your manager like that. You'd been here barely three days, and you were already coping with losing everyone you knew... by daydreaming about your new, ever-charming manager. How much more embarassing could you get?

Battat shot you a strange look.

You realized you probably, literally did wave away the thoughts. Maybe you could get more embarassing.

He rolled his eyes, and made his way beside you.

"Tenna wants us Pippineses to be the furniture and cutlery," he began slowly. "So I was informed I am a candlestick. And you are a feather duster."

This took you so sideways, you sputtered and laughed. He sounded so unamused at how absolutely ridiculous this was. But it sounded fun! A romance, an excuse to hang out and chatter with the darkners here. It sounded like a bit more of a leisurely experience.

"Is it Beauty and the Beast?"

"What th- what else has a singing candlestick? Humour me." Something in his voice betrayed him, amusement could be heard dancing in the last two words. "Anyways, I hate my role, I have to sing."

"You can sing?" Your eyes widened.

"If I have to sing in front of an audience," He joked dryly, "I'll hurt everyone then myself."

You raised your brows at his attempt at humour.

He snorted a single laugh.

You noticed today, he was a bit more relaxed. Maybe Mike spoke to him - although their encounter moments ago told you they were, at least, very convincing with their bickering.

"Mr. Tenna wanted to set up a play so we can all..." his face twisted. "Get acquainted. Glad he wasn't cruel about it by making you a main actor." He muttered the last bit.

He had a point. You liked the idea of getting to participate in something fun like this, but being a main actor would probably give you the nervous sweats. You were camera shy, stage shy, and the only thing that made being up there tolerable in the few times you had to run across the stage was poor vision in an already half-lit room.

Suddenly, being a feather duster sounded ideal.

"Who're the leads?"

"Well, Elnina and Lanino. They're perfect for this stuff if they remember what they're doing."

You nodded.

"Anyways," Battat leaned back. "You're supposed to be my trainee when Mike's busy. He and Mr. Tenna are directing. So you're practicing with me."

"Okay. Uhh... where do we start?"

"We'll do a read through, first."

And so you both read the script together - Battat decided you both should take turns reading lines, so you could keep at the same pace. It went smoothly. You stuttered a bit at some lines. "Don't worry," he assured at one point. "You only put your chest in it when it's your line."

He didn't take his own advice, though, he sounded strained and uncomfortable as he tried to read Lumière's lines. He put on a shitty, fake French accent. As soon as he caught you trying not to laugh, he immediately shut you up with a glare.

You'd just have to laugh later.

But you didn't even notice the day going by - the other darkners filling up the room and practicing in little pockets, the Weather Duo's dramatic reads of lines earning giggles from

throughout the room. You were engrossed in reading with Battat, and listening to him strain through lines. If nothing else, the rehearsals would be really funny. You already secretly found entertainment in Battat struggling. You tried, a few times, to engage in awkward small talk.

"It's a good thing I can't see well," you'd laughed nervously. "It makes being on stage just a little easier."

You couldn't tell if his stare was in interest in what you were saying, or if he wanted you to shut up if it wasn't directly regarding your work. That was the last of your attempts to share anything about yourself.

You both pretended to ignore the reveal of your characters being romantically involved; but you caught the reaction he tried to hide. He'd frozen, his face didn't move a muscle. His cheeks flushed a pretty, meadowy green. He swallowed, then his face dropped back into a scowl. He hummed as he flipped the page without further acknowledgement. You dreaded this a bit - why did you have to be paired with the guy who didn't like you? Who was rude, snarky... Mike described him as shy, and you could see that, a bit. Battat wasn't thrilled about having to sing onstage (however, you secretly were eager to see how that would play out), and he seemed somehow even less eager at the prospect of embracing and dancing with you in front of everyone.

Not like he'd consider it privately, either, you thought bitterly. You blinked, realizing you were strangely bothered by this. Maybe you just didn't like being treated like you were revolting. That was it.

"Are you going to the party tonight?"

The question snapped you out of your thoughts.

A red Pippins stood before you and Battat, arms folded behind their back as they gazed curiously, expecting your answers.

"No."

"Yes."

"Yes."

You shot a glance at Battat before looking back at the Pippins. Maybe you misheard him decline.

"The Weather Duo wanted me to be there," you gave a sweet smile to the Pippins. They looked at Battat coyly, before turning a bright grin at you.

"I do too! I'd love to chat with you tonight. I've been dying to get to know you." They rocked on their heels, looking as bashful as Mike did earlier.

"That'd be wonderful." You responded earnestly.

"Well, I gotta run. Seeya tonight!" The Pippins scurried off before you could respond.

"Cheeky bastard." Battat huffed beside you.

"What?"

"Nothing. They're not bad. I guess."

Why did he seem so irate suddenly? Well, more irate than he was earlier. The same biting tone he had toward Mike was back.
"You should have fun, anyway."

"You said you were going too, right?" You leaned forward, and twisted to turn towards him a little, as he took back your attention. "Y'know if Mike will be there?"

"He's Tenna's shadow. Of course he'll be there."

His frown deepened when your eyes lit up.

Back at your room, you idly milled about.

You didn't have anything particularly interesting to wear - you only had your multiple sets of your outfit, courtesy of Mike. You stood in the mirror and frowned. Did you look appropriate for a party? It was supposed to be a casual event.

You frowned a little at your reflection, and reached up to your scarf - gently pulling it out from where it was neatly wrapped around your neck and tucked into your cloak, and removed it. You unconsciously set it aside, then reached up to unbutton the top two buttons of your dress shirt, and adjusted your collar until your neck was a bit more comfortably exposed.

It was a work party.

In a cafeteria.

There will be drinking and food.

You were appropriate, you reminded yourself. Drinking with a scarf tightly wrapped around your neck wasn't very comfortable - and fully buttoned, it wasn't uncomfortable, but you preferred to look a little more "relaxed" if you were going to be doing... whatever will go on.

And it was different enough from your usual look that you could feel like you'd at least done something different.

You sighed at your reflection. "I can be so stuffy..."

When you'd made your way downstairs, it became (fortunately) abundantly clear there was a party. Darkners milled around in hallways, chatting and trilling, holding drinks and sitting around playing cards. The hallways were lit as usual, but as you peered into the cafeteria, you could see the lights were a little dimmer. You cautiously stepped inside, and scanned the room for familiar faces.

Mr. Tenna was the easiest to spot. He'd shrunk down to be able to fit at the table with the Weather Duo, but his massive stature was still... well, massive. You recognized some staff - including Shuttahs and Zappers, who you saw less often - hanging around the now makeshift bar. A Pippins, and the barkeeper from the Green Room, Ramb, manned the station.

Mike sat awkwardly beside Mr. Tenna, but his shape threw you off. Imposingly large, probably about ten feet in height, his head wobbled side to side as he engaged in conversing with his colleages. He sported his usual red bow, but... boxing gloves, and a cowboy hat. And a funky bandana.

Regardless, you made your way over to him.

"Hey, Mike," you anxiously called.

He turned to you, and you noticed he had... no mouth tonight.

"Uh, heya. Need anything?"

You suddenly felt embarassed.

"Ah, uh, no, I just didn't see much of you all day outside your cat costume... I just wanted to say hello," sheepishly, you put your claws behind your back. You mentally kicked yourself for being awkward. "It's really nice to see you."

"Yeah, well," he began, a thick Boston accent took over. "Is nice to see you too." His head wobbled as blush glowed from... where his cheeks SHOULD be. His anatomy was not unlike a Zapper's now.

"Red velvet, dahling!" Elnina grabbed you and pulled you into a half hug, interrupting your thoughts. "Isn't this so exciting? Your first party here," her eyes twinkled mischeviously. She already smelt of booze.

"Nina, dewdrop," Lanino called adoringly. "You're gonna make the poor Pippins drop from your beauty, dear!"

Mr. Tenna laughed at the interaction, and leaned in to mock whisper to you. "You should run along, before these two NEVER stop flirting! Seriously! Love is in more than just the air tonight, folks!"

Elnina smacked Mr. Tenna's arm playfully, as a loud laughing track erupted from his speakers.

You took his advice.

A tap on your shoulder was your getaway.

A Shadowguy towered over you, and playfully motioned for to follow him as he lead you to the bar stools. He waved down a bartender, and motioned for you to get a drink. His cheshire cat-like smile was strangely charming. You knew he couldn't speak, so you were stuck interpreting his charades and trills.

You supposed you'd eventually understand him - everyone else seemed to understand Shadowguy sounds fluently. Maybe this was something you should study so they didn't have to work so hard to communicate to you.

You ordered some fruity blue raspberry tequila and he ordered what seemed to simply be whiskey.

You meekly sipped as he patiently tried to ask questions through motion and sounds. It took a lot of tries, but you learnt he was just asking you simple small talk.
His grin widened, and he tapped on you again to point past you. You followed his shadowy finger and saw Battat, at the furthest end of the bar.

He was half laying on the counter, as Ramb took two empty glasses from him. You looked back to the Shadowguy, and he was gone. What the hell? You looked back to Battat.

The green Pippins was staring off into nowhere, eyes transfixed on the wall.

You decided against your better judgement to check up on him.

"H-hey," you tried to force a smile. He didn't move. "Funny seeing you here."

He sighed. "I said I would be, right? Where'd your date go?"

"Date? I don't have a date," what was he even talking about?!

"The Pippins? Or the Shadowguy?" He finally turned a bit to raise an eyebrow at you.

"They weren't dates. I didn't even see the Pippins," you wagged a finger at him. "Don't be weird."

"I- No, I'm not weird!" He sat up quickly. He looked at you with his brows furrowed. "I thought you-"

"Why would it even matter if I was with someone, anyway?" You interrogated. "I came to say hi, didn't I?"

"Well, I- you- ugh, you-" his eyes darted behind you and widened.

An blood curdling scream startled the both of you as you whirled to identify the sound, hearts pounding. Battat jumped into action, grabbing you by your claws and dragging you toward the scene.

He pulled through the crowd, and he froze. You squirmed to peer through the gap between Battat and a Zapper's waist.

"Fuck." Battat breathed.

Elnina was on the floor, clutching her ankle. It looked swollen, purple and puffy already.

"Won't someone call an Ambyu-Lance?!" Lanino's helpless wail rang out.

Mr. Tenna's frantic speaking was hard to keep up with as he moved away from the scene - but it was clear he was already on it.

Mike, and a few Zappers began to clear out the crowd.

"Awwight everyone, awwight, time for yous to head on to your rooms."

Battat kept your claws clutched in his as he helped guide you out of the horde of murmuring, uneasy darkners.

You appreciated it, really. You forgot you were even beginning to argue with him before everything went south. But even the tread back to the elevators was busy, overwhelming, overstimulating - everyone was leaving at one, some looking to make sure their friends were keeping up, some rushing out, some trying to rubberneck and see what exactly was going on. Bodies pushed and shoved past you, disorienting you further.

Images of Elnina, crumpled on the ground, bawling as she clutched her ankle flashed across your vision. How could this happen? Would she be okay? How did something happen like that when she was surrounded by her husband, Mr. Tenna, and Mike? Was it a freak accident?

"I heard she climbed onto the table and fell," a murmur from a darkner near you.

"I saw it! The lass was drunk off her clouds! She jumped up and slipped on a plate," another darkner said in a hush.

"Poor thing. It must be a nasty sprain, at least," a sympathetic Boston accent.

"Her husband's gotta stop making it worse by panicking, though," another tutted.

Finally you were squeezed into the elevator. Squished between probably too many darkners to fit comfortably inside the elevator, you couldn't even move your head. But your head was pressed against something green, and a weight around your shoulders felt strangely like someone was holding you. You decided not to think about it. You focused on the steady rise and fall of his chest, and the hammering heartbeat below.

When you got off, it was still an uncomfortable squeeze - but the darkner holding you gently shoved you out, and continued guiding you down the hall. Your downward gaze finally wandered to your right claws again - loyally held by Battat.

As if he understood what you were thinking, he leaned in and spoke quietly. "You mentioned your poor vision... I didn't want you getting lost in the crowd... Mike would have my head if something happened to you under my nose."

You half-heartedly thanked him.

The crowd had fizzled out - a few Pippinses remained in the hallway, still murmuring in hushed whispers about Elnina, or more openly chatting about whatever plans they had, who they were seeing, idle gossip. A couple eyes followed you and Battat. You pointedly ignored them. They were just curious, but the prying eyes made you feel small. Battat seemed to notice and sped up.

When you got to your door, you quickly unlocked it - claws fumbling to stay still. Battat positioned himself to shield you from vision.

"Get rest," he mumbled. "Sorry about tonight."

You frowned up at him. "Elnina's accident wasn't your fault, though?"

He raised an eyebrow before sighing. "Well, no... sure. Whatever. Just sorry. Please take it easy. I'll see you in the morning."

He flashed a peace sign with his claws, and went two doors down, unlocked his own door, and slipped inside.

Oh. He's your neighbour.

You went inside your own room and closed the door, locking it behind you.

What a mess.

Elnina's accident sobered you up, and it was all you could think about as you brushed your teeth, undressed, put on a modest set of pajamas, and opened the curtains. Watching the snow fall outside would be a nice source of comfort, maybe. You kept a small nightlight on, and crawled into bed.

You dreamt of ballgowns and singing candles, and being twirled in a blurry figure's arms.

Chapter 4: Finally friends

Chapter Summary

> Finally, you and Battat begin to get along. Now the drama can really begin.
>
> This was a shorter chapter, but I wrote it fully sleep deprived - surprisingly with less typos than the others. But I probably missed any remaining ones. I am so fried. 💪😔💪

"Lanino. Could you please be helpless... over there? You're in the way."

Mike's patience was a bit thin.

Muffled whimpers came from Elnina as you, Mike, and a Shadowguy Mike referred to as "Pluey" helped lift her into the wheelchair from the Green Room couch.

"Th-thank you, sweet droplets," the cloud sniffled, her makeup staining around her eyes.

"It's no trouble, Elnina," Mike grinned optimistically at her. "How could we ever not take care of our beloved Weather Girl?"

Elnina brightened at the compliment, fanning herself. "Oh, Mikey! How you flatter me so!! You're almost as sweet as my amore," she purred. The twinge of envy you almost felt at her speaking to Mike like that was instantly quelled as she turned her sapphire eyes on you. "And you! Sweetest, tastiest-" you blushed at that. "Red velvet! You have been so kind! Fixing my bandages after they got loose this morning...! Are you sure you're not a medic?"

"No, ma'am," you couldn't help but feel flustered. "If I was a medic, I'd have you never feeling pain again. Cotton candy clouds like you should never know suffering," you tried to offer her sweet words back.

Elnina squealed at your kindness, visibly flattered.

Mike cleared his throat.

"Where did the Shadowguy go? I wanted to thank him, too," she tried to twist around to see him, but Pluey was long gone. He snuck out sometime while she was showering you and Mike with compliments.

"Now that Elnina's finally situated," he began. He turned to Lanino. "Now you can be helpless near us. Or helpful. Please wheel her to the stageroom, Tenna has an announcement for us."

Lanino frantically nodded, cooing to his "dewdrop" as he grabbed the handles of her wheelchair and took her away.

Mike sighed. "Shame that happened to her. Poor thing."

You kept up with him as he followed a distance from the duo, careful to not let them overhear.
"What even happened?" You asked in concern. "I was with Battat, and suddenly we heard her scream..."

"She was drunk," Mike answered simply. "Drunk people make bad decisions. Thankfully it's just a sprain." He ran a gloved hand over his combover. "I don't think I could stomach even seeing a broken bone. Tenna malfunctioning stresses me enough."

He suddenly stopped as something buzzed in his pocket.

"Boss is really stressed today," he began cautiously. You perked your hidden ears as he spoke.

"He may not show it if everything goes well, but. I'll have to kitty it up a bit." He looked uncomfortable. "I'll check in with you tonight, I'm so sorry." He patted you on the back before turning to go down a seperate hallway, swearing to himself.

You remembered you wanted to ask about the cowboy thing, but decided that could wait.

You made the rest of the walk to the backstage room by yourself, peeking through the door to see others were already gathering and taking seats. The bleachers still weren't full, yet.

The backstage room had two entrances - one in the stageroom itself, and another in a connected hallway, so darkners like Elnina didn't need to climb the threatre stairs in order to get in. It also made clearing the room a lot easier. You shuffled inside, shooting Elnina and Lanino a friendly smile as you made your way to the bleachers. You saved room for Battat, knowing he was to show up any moment now. As the room filled with darkners, Mr. Tenna walked in. He was missing his signature tailcoat today, and opted for a dark crimson sweater vest with a faint checker pattern instead. His tie was tucked under it for once. It fit his robotic body well, you believed. It was a bit more casual, too. His broad shoulders were still nicely complimented in this outside - it made him look less frightening than the tailcoat did. Which felt silly to think, now that you'd begun to get used to your dorky boss - but when you first saw him, his large, padded shoulders bulked his already massive frame more.

Battat followed near immediately after. He looked bored as he scanned the room. When he spotted you, he straightened his posture and quickly made his way to you. You patted the empty space beside you as he hopped up.

"Saving seats for me now?" His forest green eyes glinted teasingly.

"I can't tell if you're being sarcastic," you squinted at him.

"No, just playing. But thanks." He hummed.

"I'd like everybody's attention, please," Mr. Tenna finally spoke. He was seated in a larger chair he'd moved to the front of the room, facing everyone. Mike slunk into the room, pink and yellow eyes peeking around until they landed on Mr. Tenna, and he quickly made his way over to the CRT. He jumped up to perch on the armrest of the large chair. His tail flicked back and forth as he watched his boss like a hawk.

You'd gotten used to all the rooms here being large enough to accommodate the Lord of the Screens, but you noted that backstage, he was a lot more careful with his size - he was still massive, but carefully kept himself shrunk to maybe ten feet in height.

"As we all know," the television began, "we were in the beginnings of producing... a stageplay!" Word art appeared around him of "stageplay", bedazzled in red with lights surrounding the letters. How the hell did he do that.

"But one of our Shining Stars," there was the word art again. "Ended up injuring herself!" He shrunk, screen going black. "But! The show must go on!" He resumed his normal size, adjusting his tie proudly. "So we will be announcing our NEW STARS."
This perked your interest.

"I'll be honest, I picked out understudies, but I didn't think to tell anyone. Who knew our weather lady would have a spillage?" He mock whispered, earning some chuckles in the crowd. Your gaze darted to Elnina, who rolled her eyes dramatically enough that you could see even from where you sat.

"Lanino will be taking on a new role, so he won't be romancing any princess who isn't his dearest dewdrop," Mr. Tenna chuckled. "So I have the backups for Beauty, and our princely Beast," he practically sang.

You'd wished he'd get to the point, as Battat had snuck a drink from his water bottle when Mr. Tenna dropped the bomb.

"I'd made my favourite Pippinses the understudies to our Beauty, and Beast! Give it up for our new stars!" He waved towards you both.

Battat spewed water everywhere, earning some startled and pissed off noises in front of you two. You'd instantly flinched out of the way to avoid the side spray. His face was immediately a shade you'd never seen on him.

You wished you could just evaporate and die on the spot. You hid your face in your hands as Battat continued to sputter horrified sounds.

"I picked you two because you visually compliment each other just as nicely as my weather duo," his motors purred as he spoke. "BUT!" - he clapped his hands once -"I could be the beast if you don't want to," Tenna offered lightheartedly. "How is that?" He leaned in mischeviously. "Or I could be your beauty!"

"I'll do it," Battat hung his head, hiding his face. "I was just... startled... I won't disappoint you, Mr. Tenna."

Mr. Tenna laughed loudly. "Excellent resolve! And you?"

You looked up and gave a weak thumbs up. You smiled even though the room span.

"Excellent! I thought you'd make great backup leads," Mr. Tenna purred. "You both stand out and already get along so well."

Oh God. What had you and Battat done to earn this humilation ritual? The worst part was, Mr. Tenna appeared to be like this normally. He was instigating your interpersonal troubles and was blissfully unaware. He decided to make you and your jerk coworker as cute dress up dolls to make kiss just because you were unique Pippinses. In a twisted way, you could understand how his mind decided that'd be cute. Pippinses were already considered cute, despite their mischevious, troublesome nature. And two unique Pippinses must be extra cute to the darkners here. It was a good recipe. Too bad Battat only just started tolerating you now. And you were acutely aware of this fact.

The rest of the meeting went by in a blur. You didn't really pay attention to anything but your knees as you stared downward. Your mind spiralled as you thought about how you'd have to ballroom dance with Battat, the longest dance scene in the production. Maybe he'd be in costume during that scene - but he wouldn't be during the inevitable kiss. Now you really shrunk in your seat, hoping to become invisible, covering your mouth with your gloved claws in hopes that could protect you from your future.

The gathering had ended without you snapping back to reality - some actors came to give words of encouragement or congratulations - but they quickly understood Battat was now category 5 unapproachable, and you were catatonic.

"Red Velvet, darling!" Elnina's voice popped you out of your stupor. "I'm so excited for you!" She clapped. "To have such a shimmery replacement- oh, I'm honoured! I'm so thrilled to watch you! Even if I'm sad I don't get to be the Beauty anymore," she sniffed dramatically. "Give me a hug, doll! I can't stand up, remember?"

You stood stiffly, and your posture softened as you made your way to her and leaned down for her embrace. "You'll do great," she whispered encouragingly. "I hope to be back on my feet as soon as possible, but oh, please know I'm cheering you on!"

"Th-thanks, Elnina," you stammered. "Your encouragement keeps me on cloud nine."

This worked. Her cheeks flushed, and she fanned herseld with a loud giggle. "Oh my!!! You're just as smooth a talker as Mikey!! You'll butter up that green boy in no time!!" You shot a horrified glance back at Battat. You thought you saw his eye twitch.

"Hahaha, thanks Elnina," you singsonged frantically. "You are always a fresh drizzle on a hot day!"

She glowed under your compliment.

"Me and Battat should go start practicing, now," you twiddled your gloved claws anxiously.

She nodded determinedly. "Of course! Knock us outta the park, doll! Lanino! Let's go back to the Green Room, I need some water after that hot forecast!"

God your day couldn't get worse.

You looked back at Battat. He looked like he was about to pop a blood vessel. Maybe Mr. Tenna being your co-star would've been... still intimidating, but at least Tenna was friendly. You had some confidence he wouldn't want to earnestly scare you again, even for a performance. But Battat had accepted the role, for one reason or another. Which confused you more - Mr. Tenna gave him the option to back out. Why didn't he chose it? But you chose to stay in your role, too, so maybe you didn't have room to speculate.

"You." Battat's voice was frigid. "Come here."

You obeyed, worried if you didn't, that blood vessel of his might finally burst. You were more worried about how visibly upset he was than you were about your own anxiety at this point.

"I know it is... not your fault that boss loves torturing us," he strained. "But can we at least practice somewhere private." It wasn't a question.

"Of course," you answered. "I wanna get outta here too."

"Great. Cool. Follow me." He stood up and stormed out, and you quickly followed.

Thankfully, the commotion in the room and the door already being heavy made your escape go surprisingly unnoticed.

He lead you to a stairwell on the opposite side of the building.

"Nobody but the stoners uses the stairways," he explained. "And they use the stairways on the other side of the building..." he trailed off, and his jaw tightened for a small silence.

"Look. This sucks. Let's try to get along." He nervously scratched himself as he spoke. "I'm sure you're also sick of not getting along.
Today, we are equals. And not because bossman assigned that." He rolled his eyes. "I'd like to reclaim some choice in my relationships."

You exhaled a little laugh, relieved this stairway talk was going better than you thought it would. "I'd like that. I wanted to be your friend, y'know."

He gasped almost inaudibly. But you heard it. That little gasp bounced off the shittily painted walls, echoing ever so gently through the stairwell - a sound reverberating only for your ears.

He didn't say anything further, just moved to sit against the wall. You followed, and sat beside him.

He didn't say anything at first. For a while, even. It was clear something was on his mind. You didn't think it was your place to pry - as much as you were dying to unwrap the mystery that was your green-clad, tired eyed, cold coworker.

You took the initiative to break the ice, at least, and get him out of whatever had him staring at nothing in particular.

"So, here's my theory."

He twitched and turned his head a bit too quickly.

"Whoa, whoa, no need to get that excited," you laughed. "My theory is Mr. Tenna switched us out in particular, so Lanino could be the candlestick. He kinda looks like one. I'm collateral damage, of course."

"Wh-" he burst out in laughter. "You- you're kidding. Haahahahaa oh goodness. You're right?! What the heck! He does look like a candle." He leaned his head back, his cackles filled the air pleasantly. "That's a good theory. I like that theory."

You giggled. "I'm something of a theorist, really. A real investigator."

"Don't get me started," he groaned. "All I do is go down rabbitholes on my free time."

You perked at that. "What about?" You shifted your body to fully face him.

He flushed, defensively raising his claws. "You get to see my theory wall after like, level four friendship. You just breached one. You gotta work for it!"

"Excuse me?!" You pushed him playfully. "You gotta work for it! I've been scared of you!"

"I-I've been trying!! You're just an idiot!"

"An idiot?! From you?!"

For a while, your playful bickering was the only thing in the world. Something warm enveloped your chest as you laughed like you were both were young again. Eventually, conversation found its way back to the play - it was still an embarassing sore spot, "but we can try to have fun with it still," you'd reassured the green Pippins. He met you with rolling his tired eyes. At the end of the day, you were still two outsiders, it was better you two finally got along.

You'd finally decided to retire to your rooms.

"So, uh..." he frowned at the wallpaper beside your door. "I guess, goodnight?"

"Something like that." You hummed, tuckered out. You turned to look at him again.

He smiled at you. You only then noticed he had a crooked smile. It was... sweet.

He leaned his shoulders and head against the wall as he watched you unlock your door, just to stand there with your claws on the handle, looking back at him. It was strange seeing him with a relaxed expression - not that you thought he was incapable, but he normally had irritation as his resting expression. He really was something like a cat you just had to let get used to you for it to warm up. His eyes watched you intently. It was nice to not shrink under

them. As much as the other darkners expressed interest in you, you didn't get as much chances to sit around and bond with them, so it was really you and whoever happened to work in closest proximity to you - and that was Mike and Battat.

It was nice Battat now, apparently, began viewing you as a friend.

"Uh, so are..." he rolled his head a little. "You going to go...?"

"Are you like, waiting? For me to go inside?" You giggled. "That's kinda weir-"

"I'm just makin' sure you're home safe! S-shut up!" He sputtered, straightening. "Sheesh."

"You live like, two doors down." You laughed quietly, trying not to be loud.

"I'm being a good neighbour," he straightened his tie. Then he wagged a green, gloved claw at you. "I could be leaving ya to the wolves out here!"

You frowned. "Are there wolves here...?"

He choked and turned around. "N-no."

"You're laughing at me."

"No I'm not."

"Yes you are."

"No."

You pretended to sniffle. He whirled around, a "who-whoawhoawhoa," quickly rolling out of him before he saw your mischevious expression.

"Oh my god. Get out of my sight," he groaned. "You're terrible."

"Okay, goodnight for reals," something in your expression brought a meadowy glow to his face. "I'm going to bed, it's been... wild."

"You can say that again." The green Pippins walked to his door. Now it was your turn to watch him unlock his door.

He sharply looked over his shoulder. "Now you're the weird one!" And quickly went inside, slamming the door shut.

You laughed alone to yourself as you entered your room.

You brushed your teeth, and looked at the clock for a moment. It was getting pretty late. You decided you'd just go to bed - Mike said he'd come check in with you, but you wanted to sleep. You sat around for 20 minutes before changing into pajamas and crawling into bed.

He'd forgive you if you slept through his knocks, right? If he came by?

But no knocking came.

You didn't seem to mind.

You dreamt of meadows and ballrooms, and something sat strangely in the back of your mind, lacing your dreams with unease.

Chapter 5: City lights

Chapter Summary

WOO. A big chapter. If took longer to write than I expected!!

"I'll be lucky if my throat isn't in pieces after this."

Battat sat on the floor of your apartment with a clawed hand on his forehead. You didn't pay it much mind the first time you both read through the script, but now that he actually had to practice, he begrudgingly had to learn how to roar and howl. And speak in a more gruff, gutteral voice.

"At least the beast is a weirdo like you." You responded simply, controlling your tone tightly.

"WHAT?" He shouted in shock.

"You got it now!" You burst out laughing.

"Oh, got it," he coughed. He looked just as irritated as his throat surely was. "You're just gonna be stupid and mean to me to make sure I'm mad enough to go beastmode. You hate me sooo much."

"Oh shut up, you're meaner like, eighty percent of the time." Your snicker earned his squinted expression. You laughed and handed his water bottle to him.

He tutted quietly before pressing the bottle to his lips and taking a large drink. "Ughh. I'm never going to recover. What the heck was Mr. Tenna thinking when he decided to make us the leads?"

"Red and green cute. Christmas colours," you eyerolled. "At least we're friends now. It'd be worse if we weren't."

He snorted. "True. Still studying my old role juust in case," he sighed. "It'd be nice if Elnina recovers in time. I don't think I can do this gruff beast voice forever."

"Neither can Lanino." You joked in response. As much as you were glad this was the bizarre turn of events that made Battat raise the white flag and offer friendship, you missed the idea of being a minor character. Sure, your role as a featherduster was simply to flirt with Battat. But you had fewer lines, and weren't the spotlight. Most people forgot the featherduster was even a character! Now you had to be stuck actually dancing with and kissing Battat. The idea made your stomach do dances, and you weren't sure what you felt about that. Maybe like you were gonna throw up. You'd both preferred Elnina never sprain her ankle - it was surprising

when the medics didn't fully heal her, and opted for her to rest. Maybe it was a ploy to get Mr. Tenna to stop overworking her, you theorized to Battat. He'd laughed loudly and agreed.

"Ah, it's late." Battat's voice broke your thoughts. He was looking at your clock. "I should get going."

"R-right," you nodded.

He looked your way, then gathered up his script and papers. You stayed seated on the floor, opting to watch him maneuver around you and to your door.

"Well... goodnight," he said awkwardly. He flashed you another crooked grin. "I'll be kinda late in the morning. Hope you'll survive by yourself."

"Oh shut up-"

"Sleep tight!" He swung open the door, and was gone.

He didn't even hang around to hear you say goodnight, your soft words only left to be heard by your walls. You sighed.

Your role as the lead meant you, too, had more dialogue, and musical numbers. You tried not to think hard about being shoved into a ballgown for whenever costume fittings and dress rehearsals begin. Regardless of gender, the Pippinses were always thrown in cute costumes when it came to Mr. Tenna's broadcasts. You heard rumours about him not liking the Pippinses too much, but it didn't hold too much weight, you thought. He just didn't like that most of them enjoyed gambling, drinking or slacking on the job, or scamming. However, that did not stop his kindness. And his clear delight to see a cute cast.

You got up, and stood idly for a moment, before moving to lock your door. You continued to stand, lost in thought. It'd been a little bit since you spent time with Mike - he was supposed to be training you, but now with the whole play thing, he was mostly glued to Tenna's side. You frowned. His stand-in, Battat, at least was finally warming up to you. The first couple days of knowing him, he'd intimidated you - and you made an ass of yourself trying to get away. But it appeared Mike spoke to him, and now he was approachable.

And had just been sitting with you in your apartment, til late hours, goofing off between practicing your lines.

You both were still not keen on practicing the latter parts of the story together. He had frowned, face viridescent, and hastily suggested the earlier scenes. He had a bit too much fun yelling and roaring at you, until his throat hurt. But you weren't afraid of him now. You'd laughed under his acting - Beast's lines could be immature, which made Battat's over-the-top delivery hilarious to you. You didn't even know he was capable of letting loose and goofing off!

You sighed, and cleaned up. You unthinkingly took a drink of the water bottle left on the little coffee table, and froze. Your face went hot before screwing the cap back on and immediately

heading to the washroom to rinse your face, and shower. You had to scrub away the embarassment somehow.

You got into your silly maple adorned pajamas (who thought to have that stocked in your room, in preparation for you?), and crawled into bed. It took a while to fall asleep.

You didn't dream of anything.

When you'd woken up, you rolled out of bed with a groan and sleepwalked through your routine - brushing teeth, throwing on your clothes, chugging chocolate milk and double checking you had everything you needed. Keys, wallet with your points card, your phone. Yep. Everything there.

A knock at your door disrupted you.

"Hello?" You called out. "I'm just getting my shoes on, I'll be out in a sec!"

"Awesome!" Mike's voice rang out cheerfully. You sped up eagerly. You swung upen the door to see that familiar grin you'd come to secretly adore.

"Hey, I missed you, y'know," you blurted. You tried to play it cool. "I thought we were friends," you added teasingly.

"Wowie! I didn't think our friendship expired!" Mike bounced back. A pink glow emitted from his cheeks. "It's been a while, so I wanted to see you again. You know Mr. Tenna, he's had my hands tied," he said sheepishly. "But I can't leave my star protogé neglected!" He waved a finger playfully in your direction, perking back up.

You blushed and laughed. "So what's the deal with always having to be a cat lately?"

"Mr. Tenna is a very stressed man," Mike explained, hands behind his round head. "Sometimes he wants me to shuddap and listen. He can get real... affectionate. As a cat it's a bit easier. It's embarassing! So I don't like to talk about it... but I get uh, real in character to really embody a cute cat."

"That's... unprofessional," you snuck him a sympathetic, yet lighthearted glance. "And the cowboy thing?"

"Sometimes he wants a bodyguard," he sounded a little nervous. "I'm... a shapeshifter,"

"You are?" You raised an eyebrow.

"Yes! But it takes a lot of effort. And I need to redress myself. So I prefer not to do it around others," he finished hastily. "Anyway, I wanted to ask, are you free tonight?"

"Well, I can be," you offered. "I'm sure Battat would understand if I couldn't practice with him for one night."

There was a long pause as he walked with you to the elevator.

"Yeah. I'm sure he wouldn't mind." His voice sounded strangled.

"Are you okay?"

He jolted out of his sudden melancholy to hit you with his beaming smile. "Of course! I've just been really tired lately. Not sleeping well. Just been busy, busy, busy! But I wanted to make time for you," he flushed. "I didn't know how else to ask so I decided to just come see ya and be straightforward. I'd love to take you for dinner and chat."

Your heart raced. "Is that okay? Even though you're my..."

"Darkners here don't really get to mingle," he laughed. "So while it's probably not... ideal, it's fine, but you could totally decline if you-"

"Wait wait wait, I want to! I just wasn't sure if it was... allowed."

He burst out laughing - a familiar cackle that sent butterflies back and forth inside you.

"HAHA. This place is... I wouldn't sweat that! How's tonight sound? I'll getcha after work?" He grinned.

You nodded enthusiastically. "I'll be waiting in my apartment, so you can find me."

"Wonderful! I gotta run to bossman now... I'll see ya tonight, sweetheart."

The day went by smoothly. You saw Mike chatting to Mr. Tenna and he playfully blew you a kiss before returning to his conversation. The CRT didn't notice, too engrossed in reading what was on the clipboard Mike was holding.

The next few hours was just the usual - you were helping some other Pippinses with making props to prepare for the play. You got to know a few - but neglected to get their names. Idle chatter and laughter was exchanged among you as you worked. You quickly figured out you felt pretty at home here - as much as you still desperately missed your family, you were beginning to fit in. Making friends, meeting other darkners you never would've before. You felt like you were a part of something even if you were initially lost coming in here. You were surprised at how quickly those hours flew by.

At lunch, you checked in on Elnina - who seemed content camping in the Green Room. You sat with her and ate your lunch while she prattled away about her activities - they'd improvised the weather channel to be hosted while she lounged on a couch instead of her usual bouncing around. She prattled excitedly about a date she and Lanino went on - and how she was finding ways to "enjoy intimacy" with a sprained ankle.

"Enough about me!" She sang as you folded your napkin, finished with your sandwich. "What about you, Red Velvet? Doing anything fun tonight?"

Your face involuntarily gave you away.

"Oh!!! Who is it?!"

"Wh- what do you mean, WHO?!" You squeaked. "I didn't even say anything!"

Her eyes twinkled delightedly, like stars reflecting in her sapphire irises. "Your face, raindrop! Who is it? Is it the green boy? He's been like a lost puppy for y-"

"No! No! Absolutely not!" You were mortified by her guessing games. "I don't even think he'd look at me that way! And I definitely don't see him as anything!!"

"Not true!" She pouted, clearly enjoying your reaction. "Love is in your forecast!"

"Ohhh my gosh, Elnina! You're so scandalous!" You sighed. "I don't want anyone hearing us! But no!! It's not Battat!"

"Oh, dearie- you're so red!" she giggled. You tried to imitate Battat's glare, only for her to laugh more. Instead of the desired effect.

"Yeah, 'cause I'm embarassed! I have shame! I'm not hunting two men at once! What is your proooblem," you complained.

"Who is it, then?" She leaned in with a whisper, her smile unable to leave her face.

"Ahh, I can't lie to you." You sighed and sunk your shoulder into the cushions. You'd been sitting sideways to face her until you finally slumped into the couch. "It's Mike."

Her eyes lit up. "Mikey?! Motormouth Mikey?!"

"Y-yes, him," you stared down at your claws in embarassment. "He asked me to go to dinner. Tonight."

"Oh!!! That smooth talker!! You gotta tell me all the deets tomorrow!" She purred. You knew, at least, she wouldn't tell anyone. Except Lanino, likely, but he cared more about how cute she was when telling him anything. So your secret was safe. "Does your green boy know?"

"Wh- gr- no! He's NOT my boy, nor my green boy," you stammered. "I just told you he doesn't see me like that!!"

She laughed loudly. "Oh fiiine! I'll shush up! He's coming now, anyways."

You stiffened, panicked, and you frantically spun to see where he was coming from.

She was in hysterics at your reaction. That cheeky cloud, you cursed to yourself. But she was right. Battat was reading some papers on a clipboard as he made his way into the Green Room - coming from the cafeteria. His brow was furrowed at something he was reading. Papers in one hand, coffee in the other. His gaze shot up, as if to make sure he was going the right way. He spotted you with a subtle nod, expression unchanging.

Pleasedontcomeoverpleasedontcomeoverpleasedontcomeoverelninasbeingridiculouspleasestayoverthere, your thoughts frantically spun in your head as you prayed he'd somehow,

magically, hear your telepathic waves. That you didn't possess, evidently, as he strode directly over to you.

"Hey."

Elnina was still struggling to compose herself. If she wasn't injured, you'd have killed her, you thought.

"Hey."

He looked at Elnina, who was probably one... who knew. Word, breath, any kind of reaction from you, away from bursting out giggling again. His forest green eyes made their way back to you.

"Lunch ends soon. Today they're making us start to act out scenes," he stated. "Thrilled."

"Fun." You felt like you were on eggshells. Mainly because of Elnina. "I'll see you there?"

He didn't respond for a moment. "Yeah. I'll see ya. Good luck."

You were suddenly grateful his dry, uninterested tone was present around others, because Elnina finally composed herself. You waited awkwardly as he scanned you both again, before shrugging and walking off. You didn't say a word until you heard him close the door behind him.

"You..." you turned to Elnina.

"I didn't say anything!"

"He could TELL."

"You just know him so well, y'know, maybe it's Mike who should be worried-"

"Okay," you stood up quickly, earning more giggles from her. She was just a case study today. "I'm going to get ready with everyone else. If he questions me because of you, I'm telling him it's because you were saying something raunchy."

Her laughter followed you as you made your way to the large backstage room.

The practice, at least, wasn't too horrible. Most of the focus was on the opening scenes - the "side character" actors singing with you as your character was introduced. All of it was off-key, and Mr. Tenna, you learnt, was very rigid about making sure everyone was coordinated. The Pippins playing your father had a real good old man voice, you noticed. They were probably having the most fun yet if they'd spent that much effort in sounding like a dorky old man. The beast scenes hadn't been reached yet. So Battat disappeared to get his measurements done by the costume crew before coming back to watch the practice rehearsals.

There'd be a lot of practice rehearsals, you noted, provided how nitpicky Mr. Tenna was. He had broadway standards. It made sense, at least. He was a television. His nose would

disappear as he would show scenes from a previous broadway performance on his screen to show you and the others how he wanted scenes to look. Lanino could occasionally be heard in the closet practicing his musical piece. Which earned the odd giggle or two rippling through the room. His French accent was worse than Battat's.

Finally, it was over, you were all dismissed for the day.

Battat finally caught up with you.

"Your singing wasn't too bad," he smirked.

"Can't wait to hear yours."

"I don't sing in this role."

"Yes you do."

His jaw dropped. "No?"

"Mr. Tenna is keeping in the duet with us," you squinted. "You don't sing as much, but look at the script."

"I'm gonna be under his bed when he goes to sleep tonight." He smacked his forehead. "Anyways, I can't practice tonight."

You tried to hide your relief. "It's fine, I have plans tonight."

"I kn- am getting groceries tonight," he said. "I was beginning to scrounge off pickles before I realized I'm gonna brine myself to death."

You laughed. "Pickles are a good way to go out, at least."

"Sure, if you enjoy 3AM heartburn," he slapped you on the shoulder. "I'll be on my way, then." He flashed his crooked smile at you. "Have a good rest-of-your-night."

You smiled sweetly back at him. "You too, Batts."

His crooked smile turned into a crooked grin as he turned and walked away from you.

Your heart felt a little funny.

Maybe it was the egg sandwich from lunch disagreeing with you - but you didn't have time to worry about that.

You made your way to the elevators, and up to your room. You frowned again when you got to your mirror.

You really needed to invest in different clothing, you thought, but you also didn't even consider dating. It wasn't even a concept in your mind until now. You brushed your teeth, and opted again for the open collar look, but a third button undone. You worried for a moment

you were getting scandalous, before you reminded yourself: this is a date. Seeing your collarbone wasn't that big of a deal. Your poncho and gloves always had a gold shimmer over the deep red, but tonight it felt particularly shimmery.

A knock at the door jolted you into answering quickly.

Mike stood, dressed in what was close to his usual attire, except his top actually matched his jet black pants and shoes, instead of the charcoal top. His dress shirt underneath, too, was black. Only his red bowtie sported any colour. He was handsome.

"Hey."

"Hey," you breathed. "I-uh, sorry, ahahaa. I only have these clothes so I just. Wore em differently."

"Still takes my breath away," the microphone responded. He extended a hand. "We aren't going... anywhere terribly special," he laughed. "But it's actually outside of the building for once."

Your brows raised at this information. In the short while you'd been here, you'd never actually been outside TV World's walls - it was huge. It still felt like a big ol' maze to you. You'd almost forgot there was a world outside - despite a city skyline always twinkling in the distance of your window's view.

He lead you to a basement floor, and through a sparsely-filled underground parking. "Virtually no one ever goes through here 'cept bossman, myself, and the Weather Duo," he explained. "Just no one really sees a need to. But we're going to Cyber City." He peeked to see your reaction.

"Wow..." you spoke softly. "I'm excited."

"Sure hope so! But I didn't wanna drag ya anywhere too fancy," he sheepishly tucked his hands behind his back as you walked together. "Didn't wanna intimidate ya."

"Appreciated," you giggled. "Not like I have the dark dollars to keep up with anything fancy."

"Hah!" He laughed. "Sadly, I can't control anyone's pays, I already extend myself protecting the Pippinses."

"It kinda works, at least," you chuckled. "You heard him the other day. Assigning Pippinses as lead roles."

Mike blushed - the pink glow returned to his cheeks. "Yeah... I'm excited to see you perform."

You said nothing as your heart fluttered. You tried not to think too hard about your co-star, and Mike having to watch you two dance, embrace, and kiss onstage. You shut out the embarassment.

He lead you to a sleek black vehicle, and opened the passenger door for you.

You stepped in with a shy thanks.

It was nearly an hour drive - Mike asked you about your day, you asked his... you were curious about Cyber City, so he answered all your questions. The radio made for pleasant background noise as he rambled on about the restaurants there, avoiding "those ruthless Addisons", apologized in advance for traffic, and how big the city was. You were excited, truly. You'd never really ventured out of the dark worlds you were used to. Being actually taken on a date to one was a whole new world to you.

He was right - Cyber City was massive. Blues and greens filled your vision - holographic advertisements, more shops and restaurants than you'd ever seen, a ferris wheel off in the distance, skyscrapers so large that even pressing your face by the window did not yield you a full view. It was incredible, and a little scary. But Mike seemed pleased at your awe, bashful that he got to be the first one to take you here.

He finally pulled into a parking lot, to a small building. It was beautiful here. You could see the inside was dimly lit with low lights, and there was outdoor patios for dining. Mike shyly asked if you'd prefer indoor or outdoors. Indoors sounded nice - it was still chilly out.

"So this is all new to you," he murmured as he sat down across from you. A red Swatchling handed you both menus, and poured you both glasses of water.

"Yes," you were taking in everything. The handsome darkner across from you, and the restaurant interior. You looked back at him a little frantically. "You said you weren't taking me anywhere too fancy?"

"I did," he beamed. "This is just Italian."

You nodded, not sure if that made a difference. You flipped through the menu. "Have you been here before?" You asked, peeking curiously up at him.

"Once," he was peering at the menu, too. "I came here with Mr. Tenna. He was having a bad night so I came to pick him up. I didn't ask why he was out here. Just got some food in him and took him back. This was the only place open that late."

"I see. You're the caring type."

"S-something like that." He turned his face away as he glowed again. "I just like... doing things for others. I'll go to stupid lengths."

You exhaled a small laugh. "I dunno. Some call it stupid, but it does sound like you did the right thing."

He was silent for a moment. "Do you think if something's done with good intentions, it's still the right thing? Even if it's... morally grey?"

You frowned as you thought it over. "I guess so... intentions are always important. Why?"

Mike sighed. "I just... thinking too much, I suppose."

The Swatchling returned, asking your orders.

"I'm the designated driver," Mike joked. "I'll be having just a lemonade."

"Iced tea, for me." You smiled sweetly at the Swatchling.

When it was gone, you continued. "I don't think you need to worry too much, Mike. You've been wonderful. I-I mean! I've only known you for a short time, but. You've been wonderful during that time."

He smiled softly. "I hope so. I'm just nervous, haha. I'm terrified of messing things up. I know I will, but..."

"Everyone gets nervous sometimes," you reassured him, reaching a gloved hand to place over his. "And I'm terrified all the time."

"Ha!" He laughed. "Who could blame ya?"

"You made it easier, though," you confessed. "I was scared of you- of everyone, at first, but you've made it so much easier. I... really appreciate it."

He stammered in response. You thought it was impossible for his cheeks to get brighter, but he was full of surprises.

"You've adjusted well," he finally managed. "I'm so proud of you."

"I've barely even been here a week, and I've been thrown into a play before I could even adjust to my job." You laughed into your fist.

"If you were here forever, I don't think my feelings would change," he blurted.

You stared at each other, before giggling, faces red.

The night went smoothly. He was curious when you seemed surprised that your iced tea wasn't the lemon-y type you were familiar with from your old home, but a "sweet" tea. You drank it anyway. You both ordered pastas, thoroughly enjoying your meals, and your feet pressed against each other flirtatiously under the table. He footed the bill easily, and refused to tell you how much it cost. He handwaved it off with, "I can afford to take care of you, dear. Don't you worry that glittery head off of yours." It made sense for Mr. Tenna's shadow and right hand to be wealthy, but still; you wanted to do something nice for him sometime. Maybe you'll pick up a cookbook and learn something new.

"I'm in too deep," he sighed. "So much trouble, even, but I just want to savour being around you like this." He squeezed your hand.

You wanted to ask what he meant tonight, why he was so cryptic, but decided not to pry. You just wanted to see him happy.

The parking lot was gently lit by a single streetlight, as the restaurant finally began closing up.

"I just... wanna know," you began. You didn't see him freeze - you were busy staring off into the distance. "What made you choose me? I know I'm a fancier Pippins, but... I'm still just another Pippins."

"I have a soft spot for those who don't fit in. I wanted to look after you and began to stumble."

Those who don't fit in? Like Battat? You thought. But they seemed to always bicker.... or rather, Battat bossed Mike around. Maybe Mike tolerated it because he had a soft spot for the green Pippins.

You pushed thoughts of him out of your head. Your heart was already hammering at Mike's confession.

The drive home was relaxing - you knew you were back in the TV realm when snow began to fall again.

You hummed happily.

At your door, Mike bashfully waited for you to unlock it. He leaned against the wall, holding one of his arms as he watched you as shyly as an eyeless darkner could watch you. You knew he could see at this point, despite the lack of eyes. His skillful driving was a testament to some secret good vision you weren't willing to inquire about.

"I will be extra busy for a few days," Mike murmured. "So I'm glad I got to see you tonight. Thanks for humouring me for a while."

"No, thank you, tonight was so lovely. I've always enjoyed being around you. Thank you so much, Mike."

He smiled, yet looked strangely sad.

You leaned in, and pecked him on the cheek.

"W-wait," he gasped. He grabbed both your gloved hands. "Please, allow me." His hands trembled violently.

He pressed his lips to yours, and quickly pulled you into his embrace. You could smell his cologne, you realized, head still spinning from the very modest, fleeting kiss he'd given you. He shook a little as he wrapped around you.

"Sleep well." He murmured.

"Goodnight," you breathed.

That night, you dreamt of sinking in a sea of black dahlia flowers. You didn't feel rested.

Chapter 6: Claws

Chapter Summary

> You begin to feel like you're being torn in two.
>
> Also WOO busy weekend for me irl. It'll slow my updates for a minute, but I had lots of fun today. The reader insert is beginning to feel their skin crawl.
>
> Also to note: the character insert, while playing a female lead in the play, is STILL gender neutral. I wanted to make that clear! They just don't really care because they're too concerned with dumb and dumber (one man).

"Velvet! Doll! Morning dew! You look awful!"

Elnina's voice was laced with concern. You'd caught a glimpse of yourself in the bathroom mirror earlier - dark bags hung under your eyes today. You splashed your resin face with cold water, and it helped some, but not enough, clearly. Your cloud friend was leaning over your slouched body as you gazed lazily at her.

"I didn't sleep well," you answered honestly. "I had nightmares."

She frowned. "Was Mikey that awful?"

"No! No," you sat up quickly. "It went well! He even kissed me," you blushed at the end of that sentence. She gasped as if you told her the most scandalous news ever. "I just don't sleep well, really. Maybe it's still fear from being new."

She nodded sagely. "We should have a sleepover."

Your jaw dropped. "What?"

"It'll be fun!" She giggled. "We can watch movies, play video games, I can't really..." she wiggled her leg, reminding you of her ankle. "Otherwise I'd bake us treats, but oh, it'll still be fun! You can get wonderful rest in our place. It's much larger than the Pippinses living quarters. Cozier, too! You can tell me aaaall about that kiss!"

"Ah... I'd love that." You relented. Spending a night with a friend sounded nice. Especially one where, knowing her, your boy troubles would be reduced to a dumb gigglefest and she'd be back to prattling on about whatever entertained her in the moment. Maybe you could prod her about why Mike might've been cryptic the night before. But still, it was a wonderful date - even remembering how the night ended in particular had you praying nobody could read minds.

You loved Elnina, really - you'd become fast friends. She was easygoing and silly - perhaps a little up in the clouds, and while her emotions could get... intense! They were often fleeting. A quick storm passing by. Yet, you found her as somewhat of an anchor. Her light, silly voice felt like an escape as you found yourself feeling tugged in two directions. Lanino was her overbearing shadow - you didn't mind him, really. He was kind and sweet. But you noticed every thought of his seemed like his first.

"Maybe this Saturday? That's the day after tomorrow," she offered. "I can have Lanino help me prepare in advance." She beamed playfully at you.

"That sounds wonderful," your enthusiasm was quickly returning.

"It will be!! Ohh, I'm excited already!" She kicked her feet in excitement, before quickly following up with an "ouch!", and cautiously made sure to put her bandaged ankle down a bit more carefully. "I've been dying to do more with you," she purred. "I feel like only after I got injured did we really get to bond more!"

She leaned over to pat your angular head. You grinned under her touch. "It's been easier to find you and hang out with you now that you're mostly here in the Green Room, y'know," you wagged a finger playfully. "Before then, I only saw you like... Well. I can't really say, I've barely been here."

"I know!! You're so new and cute, I HAD to be your friend!" She gushed. She tried to pinch your cheeks, but you swiftly moved out of her reach with a smug smirk. She put in an exaggerated pout.

"I also wanted to ask-" she started. She then pointed to your gloved hands, eyes twinkling with curiosity. "I've wanted to know why you Pippinses always are wearing gloves!"

You wordlessly reached under your poncho, up to your mid-bicep and gently pulled down the velvety material. You decided to show her your left hand.

Your milky resin hand shined under the Green Room lights - not unlike your equally shiny resin head. Like every Pippins, you had three fingers and a thumb per hand, with two inch long, dagger-like claws. They near perfectly blended in with your resin flesh, but with an opalescent glimmer to them. They started after your second knuckles, with only the slightest curve to them. The underside still had flesh underneath the lower half of the claw - so it could still retain some grip so objects didn't slide out from your hands. Despite the seemingly awkward design, Pippinses had no problem grabbing things, shuffling cards, pouring drinks and partaking in normal activities. You were used to your claws. They were all you'd ever known. The gloves, however, helped. The fabric made it easier to grip and hold things - not unlike using a shirt to open a stubborn bottle lid.

"Our claws are very sharp," you murmured. You twisted it around so she could see, and she gingerly took your claws into her azure hands. "They're not retractable," you warned. "Even in my old home, we had to wear gloves to protect surfaces from our claws. We're meant for playing, but I guess playing can get dangerous." You laughed awkwardly.

She nodded as she absentmindedly examined you, running a thumb around your knuckles. "Fascinating." Her tone was earnest. "Do you all have cold skin?"

"We're not cold-blooded, if that's what you're asking. We're just made of resin, plastic, bone, wood... so we just feel cold more easily," you chuckled. "Maybe that's the real reason for the gloves!"

That earned a loud giggle from her.

"What's this?" She showed you a small scar on your wrist.

"I was injured in an accident," you explained. "I was so scared when it happened. It looks small now, but it was to the bone. I flipped ouuut. I've made a full recovery, though." You ended with a reassuring wink, but that didn't stop her concern.

"Oh!!! You poor thing!!" She squealed before yanking you into a hug. You rested your face on her shoulder for a moment. Her embrace was tight, like you were a small child of hers coming home with a booboo. It reminded you of home.

"Oh, ah, Elnina?" You asked gently. "Can I re-cover my arm now?"

"Oop!" She released you.

You both giggled as you shuffled your glove back on. "The fingertips are really resistant material," you commented. "So our claws never actually poke through. Showing our hands and claws with no gloves is usually a sign of closeness and-"

"Good thing we're besties!" She sang.

Besties. That felt nice. You forgot what else you were going to say - she really was something like a bestie to you. The thought tickled your brain kindly as you made your way to rehearsals.

"Uh... come back here, please." Battat's awkward voice lead you into the dressing room. "Poncho off, thanks."

You obeyed, and eyed him warily.

"We need your measurements," he explained flatly.

"Right." You hummed, folding your poncho to set on an empty space on the makeup counter. "I didn't know you were in the costume department?"

"Yeah. I have a knack for it." He muttered. "I used to be the head of the costume department before I was moved to mostly control room duties and just whatever the boss throws at me. Like I said when we met," he waved his hand, motioning at himself and you. "They expect Pippinses to do everything. If they let me have control over costumes, I'd never complain again. Anyway. I gotta be fast."

It was nice learning little things about him. He took measuring tape off the counter and quickly set to work. His claws expertly maneuvered around you, only gently grazing, measuring every part of you. The length of your forearms, shoulders, back, the circumference of your waist and chest, your legs... his claws ghosted against you gingerly. You knew he was only doing his job, yet you flushed in embarassment. If he noticed, he made no indication of it - his gaze was fixed on reading the numbers on the measuring tape before writing them down. He was incredibly professional. Still, you squeezed your eyes shut, feeling his gentle measuring was already enough to make the room spin, but even worse if you had to keep watching his analytical gaze making its way around you. "You have four costumes for this role," he said absently. "I have to be thorough, sorry."

He even measured your gloves as to not force you to take them off. Battat wasted no time, and soon your poncho was carefully lifted and put back over your shoulders before you were carefully shoved back out with everyone else when he was done, only for him to call in another actor. Ahh.

You'd still feel his gloved claws tingling your body for the rest of the day.

You'd gone up to continue practicing - a scene with the Zapper cast as Gaston, the bullheaded man set out to make you his wife in the play. Out of the corner of your eye, you spotted him, staring from the dressing room doorway.

Mr. Tenna snapped his fingers, and ordered you to do the scene over for being distracted.

After rehearsals, you'd found yourself with little else to do than wander to the cafeteria for anything to eat. You opted for a pizza, and sat at the barstools to eat.

"Aren't you lucky," the other red Pippins manning the cafeteria maundered. "I've been running the caf all day, and when I'm not doing that, I'm painting sets. Strange they'd make the little gloved guys handle paint," they laughed.

"No kidding," you responded. "I like the idea of painting, but not staining my clothes," you took another bite.

"I got cast as a spoon, so I'm in like. One musical number, and one fight scene, and then everything else I'm just doing backdrops. But with everyone rehearsing, I got told to run the caf if anyone's hungry." They groaned. "But it's nice talkin to folks. Everyone's buzzin about ya." They flashed you a cheeky grin.

"Good or bad?" You snorted.

"Mostly good, the only bad isn't even bad," they wiped the table as an excuse to keep standing around talking to you. "Few Pippinses noticed green boy always lookin' lost around you."

"I think experiencing emotions other than irritation is just new to him," you joked nervously.

That satisfied them, they laughed. "You're a real riot. You should come to our parties sometime. Drag green boy with you too, we like him even if he's kinda sour. He can be pretty fun when he lets loose. We always got something going on on weekends," a mischevious glint in their wink told you everything.

"I'll consider it," you agreed. You had no intentions of joining the chaos, but you decided not to outright decline.

Before you made it to the elevator, Battat found you. "You," he panted. Had he been running? "What are you up to?"

"Oh, uh... I was probably gonna shower and hit the hay early," you admitted. "I slept poorly last night." You pointed to your own tired eyes.

He raised both brows. "Something happen last night?"

"N-nothing, I just..." you wished he didn't ask. "I went out with... a friend," you concluded pathetically.

"Was it... fun?" Battat prodded. "Did you have a nice time??"

"Yes, and yes," you flushed at the memories. "I went outside TV World for the first time... and had dinner. It was nice."

"Sounds like a date."

"It- no, no! It wasn't- maybe I don't know- I don't- aaaugh!" You covered your face and began storming away.

"Did it go bad?" Battat sounded worried now as he trailed you, easily keeping pace with you.

"No! That's. Not at all! It went great!" He seemed to relax at the sight of your furious blushing. "I'm just embarassed! That's all! Can't you let a Pippins be flustered?! But I had nightmares after, and didn't sleep well!! So I felt like shit today..." You peered at him, serious in your distress.

He took you seriously, and for some reason that worsened the strange feelings haunting you.

"What did you dream?" He frowned.

"I was drowning. In a sea of flowers."

"I won't pry anymore, but... that's no fun," he pursed his lips. "Maybe you shouldn't fall asleep if it's still on your mind."

You sighed. "And what would you suggest I do about that?"

He thought about it. "I'd suggest a movie but that's probably weird after a date."

You hummed in agreement.

"We could just... practice, I guess? You look happier when I'm being loud and annoying in front of you. Like Grr!" He raised his claws in a mock Beast pounce. You giggled.

Shit. He was right! You didn't always like when he was right. And yet, you accepted his offer.

"Stairwell?" He offered.

You smiled in appreciation, and nodded. He took your wrist in his claws as he led the way.

The stairwell, as usual, was empty. You practiced more of your scenes - you had both agreed it's easier to memorize if the other read the lines of the characters talking to yours. So when a character was speaking to the beast, you'd act that part out until he memorized it, responding with his lines, and when a character spoke to the beauty, he'd be reading their lines to you for you to respond to.

"I can't wait to throw snowballs at you, apparently," you giggled.

"Oh fuck off," he laughed. "I'm sure that's the real thing you're excited about."

Your laughter filled the stairs. The next scene, you took over the candles lines.

"'You care for the girl, don't you?'" Your poor French accent always pulled a smirk from Battat.

"'More than anything'," he gruffly responded.

"'Then you'd tell her'." You read, focusing on your script. You were prodding him to confess his feelings, to earn the beauty's love, before the enchanted flower wilted - leading up to the ballroom dance. You didn't see his face before continuing. The beast was being prepared for their dance during this scene - bathed and groomed, fitted into nicer clothing, as the candle prodded him to open up.

You sighed begrudgingly. "We can't avoid it forever. We gotta do the dance. Mr. Tenna will have our heads if we don't do it."

He nodded silently.

He took your hand in his, and awkwardly, you looked away.

"I've... never danced before," you admitted. "Ever. I don't know how to do it."

He looked away, face turning emerald. "It's... I'll show you. First, we bow to each other."

You nodded, and bowed.

"At the same time!!" He barked. "Count of three. One... two... three!"

You bowed at each other.

"Better," he muttered with a small laugh.

"Now, take my hand, and were supposed to descend stairs, but we'll just... walk in one circle,"

You nodded and walked with him.

"Ugh, now. This is the real embarassing part," he laughed dryly. "Hold this hand here," he held his left hand up gingerly, and you took it. "Right, good. Now rest your arm over mine - don't. Look at me. Like that. This is literally- ohhh my god I hate you," he groaned.

You probably looked like a wet dog on the side of the road with how big your eyes were. You felt something like humiliation.

"Look! I'm just as embarassed as you are, buddy," he threw his head back. "I have to put my hand on your waist! And dance around with you- Oh my god why do you look SAD now."

"Do you have to make it sound like I am repulsive to you?" You frowned earnestly. "I know it's uncomfortable, but..." you looked away. "We have to do it."

"You're not repulsive," he sighed. He dropped his arms. "In fact, the opposite. I just suck at this. I've danced before and I got two-" he raised two gloved fingers for emphasis- "left feet! I'm the one worried I'm gonna teach you wrong, mess up, or be cringey or glooby about it! I'm not complaining because of YOU," he pointed at you accusingly.

You nodded, not sure how to react.

"Just." He ran a green hand down his face. "Don't worry. We will practice. We will master it. And we will be the sexiest dancers to have graced the stage. Mr. Tenna won't know what hit him."

You sputtered a laugh, "sexiest?!"

"Uh, yeah. Have you seen us? We're sooo cool and sexy. Why else do you think we were the understudies?" he seemed smug, your wheezing a positive affirmation to the green die. "Now back to position."

It was intimidating. But he was a patient teacher, surprisingly. It seemed as soon as he understood you were just as nervous as he was, he took over and coolly did his best to show you what to do. That didn't stop him from stopping, and pulling out his phone once or twice to look up ballroom dancing guides to watch with you. But it helped. Soon, the small space in the stairwell felt like a ballroom, and even with your occasional stumbles, you both were moving more confidently. He took you by surprise by twirling you - neither of you were sure if that was a part of the dance scene, it wasn't specified. But you'd laughed wildly at the thrill of it.

"See! Mr. Tenna won't know what hit him!" He cackled wickedly before letting you go, stumbling a bit before regaining your footing.

It was exhilarating. You'd never danced before, and having someone take the time to teach you - even if they had to - was so much fun! It felt like you were beginning to live a life

beyond just being used for games.

A saxophone trill cut you out of your delighted stupor, and you nearly jumped out of your skin with a yelp.

"Oh, hey Pluey," Battat called. "Is Jon with you?"

The trill returned, the Shadowguy only coming into view as he came down the stairs - not from walking, but sliding down the railing on his rear end.

"Oh, yeah, this is my..." he trailed off. "Friend," he finished awkwardly. He looked at you. "This is Pluey," he motioned to the Shadowguy as he jumped off the rails.

Pluey made his way to you, tooting a friendly tune and lifting his hat to greet you. Cat ears! He had cat ears!! How cute! You thought to yourself. "Hi Pluey!" You waved.

He let out a string of notes you couldn't understand, and his smile never faded as he seemed to eye Battat expectantly.

"No... they can't understand." Battat seemed cautious. "I can handle tomorrow."

Another tune.

"I'm sorry, I know. I've been practicing for the play. You know the deal." He shrugged awkwardly.

Pluey nodded in understanding, before facing you again with a trill.

"I had to teach them to dance, yeah. That's why we're back here."

He tooted something like a laugh before raising his hat at you and Battat again.

"He's saying goodnight to us," Battat laughed. "Thanks, Plues. Tell Jon not to worry about tomorrow."

He nodded excitedly, and he was gone so fast, you'd only seen an unnatural blur of black speed away. You never really got used to that part of Shadowguys.

"Don't be scared, Pluey's a sweetheart. He's one of my best friends," he shot you a small crooked smile.

"Who's Jon?" You inquired.

"Jongler, they're a Zapper, real friendly one," Batt explained. "I think you'd like my friends..." he trailed off. "Nicer than me."

"Getting along with them sounds easy, then," you laughed. "Pluey's cute," you added teasingly.

"Wh- oh. My god. You're the devil. I take it back, I'm not leaving you two alone."

It was your turn to laugh wickedly.

Soon after you both retired to the Pippinses floor, and in a way that was becoming habitual, he leaned on the wall beside your door and waited for you to unlock it.

"I will be busy tomorrow," he said. "Think you'll survive? My friend needs some help with some errands."

"Oh, I'll live," you eyerolled. "Good to know you're concerned."

"Shut uuup," he smiled crookedly. "Anyways, I hope you sleep better this time."

"I will as long as I don't hear your beast voice in my dreams," you pushed his shoulder gently with a laugh.

"Oh, nevermind, I take it back, I hope you dream of beasts and ghouls."

"You're terrible!"

He turned, and smirked over his shoulder. "I know. Sleep tight, for real, though." He held a peace sign over his shoulder as he opened his own door, then disappeared into the darkness, not bothering to turn on his own lights.

You shouldered your way into your own room, flipping on the lights with a sigh, closing the door gently and locking it behind you. You turned and pressed your back into the door for a few moments.

You really wanted to see Mike again. You felt a guilty pang for enjoying being around Battat.

You showered and crawled into bed, wondering what to do. You missed your family, to add insult to injury. In normal circumstances, you'd confide in your father or a sibling. But here, you only had Elnina. Saturday, you reminded yourself. Saturday you could open up to her and hopefully get some guidance - after all, she'd been in a happy longterm relationship for many years, as you were told by her and her absentminded husband. They seemed to have it all figured out.

You sighed, rolled over, and closed your eyes.

In your dreams, long milky claws gently grazed your exposed flesh. You couldn't tell if it was enjoyable, or if it hurt, but you didn't want to wake up.

Chapter 7: Wreckage

Chapter Summary

> Being chronically ill myself, like half this chapter was incredibly easy to write. The other half! Hahha! Well, let's justr say,
>
> Also kinda emetophobia warning? Lots of nausea mentions, and reader insert feeling like they're going to be sick, but it never happens. They are sick from the backdoor. (Writing from my own experience with chronic illness 🙌). Reader will be okay.
>
> Tenna is egregiously oblivious.

Nausea swept you.

You really weren't sure what caused it - nerves, bad breakfast. Maybe even your dinner. Maybe even an oncoming flu.

But you felt terrible.

In and out of the washroom, all morning, emptying your guts, trembling from the discomfort, lethargy sapping you of your energy, the boss noticed and Mr. Tenna pulled you aside.

"My star!" He folded his hands over his knees as he crouched to be closer to your level in the hallway. "Are you... alright?"

You shook your head. "I've been..." you squirmed. "I uh... how familiar are you with 'sickness'?" You asked weakly.

His eyeless expression had been crinkled in concern, and somehow it softened.

"Enough to see something's wrong." He said sympathetically. "You don't need to push yourself today."

"I'll be fine," you whimpered. "I probably just... need medicine-"

"And rest." His voice was a little firm, like a concerned parent. "You know we have a pharmacy here, right? On the first floor?"

You nodded. You actually forgot about it, but it did ring a bell.

"Swing by there, and head home." Mr. Tenna spoke kindly. "I don't need you getting sick on set."

"It's the backdoor, actually," you joked pathetically.

"Same thing, different packaging. I'm glad I don't know what it's like, but," he projected a clip of a man winking across his screen, before his dorky, yet kind expression returned. "I can tell when something's wrong, and when you need rest, my star! I can get Mike to take you-"

"No, no! I don't want him- or anyone - seeing me like this," you sounded immediately more distressed. Mr. Tenna frowned. "I can take care of myself." You tried to reassure.

"Understood. Please rest up, dear! We can't have fun if sickness has you feeling glooby! If there's anything you need, give me a holler!" He beamed, before finally standing up. "Please take care of yourself!" He sang, and walked back into the rehearsal room.

You were grateful that he really tried to be a caring boss.

You speedwalked your way to the pharmacy - it was on the first floor, you knew that. It was manned by a Shadowguy and a Zapper, Mike had shown you during his tour on your first arrival. But you didn't go inside initially - you supposed your health would've been more stable. You shouldered through the door - greeted by a friendly toot.

"H-hi," you stammered to the Shadowguy as he smoothly made his way to you. "I need... stomach medicine."

He warbled in concern and lead you down an aisle. You squinted at the boxes on display.

Vomiting, nausea, diarrhea, constipation, indigestion...

Ignoring the Shadowguy's watch, you picked out the diarrhea medicine, then self-consciousness won.

"I ate something bad, probably," you mumbled.

A sad chirp.

"Yeah. So bad Mr. Tenna sent me off for the day."

Another chirp, resembling a gasp.

"Hahaha... yeah. I feel awful."

He held up one shadowy finger, before darting off. You waited patiently for his return.

Sure enough - the darkners that moved at unnatural speed, Shadowguys, were capable of speeds a bit frightening to you. Maybe it was their status as being literal shadows, they didn't need to obey physics as strictly as other darkners. But he was back in seconds with 3 large bottles of blue and red. He held one out for you to read.

Energy drinks, packed with electrolytes.

"Oh, you're so smart," you smiled sincerely at him. He seemed to eat up the praise with a delighted jazz purr. "I didn't even think about that. Thank you, sweetheart- wait, Pluey?"

He wiggled excitedly at your recognition, excitedly lifting his hat.

You brightened a bit, despite your sickness. You recognized a Shadowguy!! Big steps! And it was Pluey!!!

He gently guided you to the checkout, where an imposing Zapper sat. You realized they sat at a chair with the seeming intention to make themself smaller to customers.

"H-hello-"

The Shadowguy's quick whistling told the Zapper whatever it was that they needed to know; they straightened, and gave you their full attention.

"Hey buddy, youse got everything you need?"

"Yes, thanks." You smiled. "Pluey here helped."

"Awws," the Zapper wiggled their head side to side, a small blush forming. "Das our Plues, such a sweetie. Hope yous feels better, soon," they sympathetically buzzed.

You thanked them sheepishly.

You paid for your items, and thanked the Zapper-Shadowguy duo for their help. The Zapper spoke kindly and gently, probably as to not scare you. Their sincerity felt comforting. You'd bring them a gift later, you thought, once you recovered. Maybe you could bake some cupcakes to deliver. It wasn't a huge deal, but you appreciated kindness more than usual today.

While walking back, your stomach twisted again. Nausea swept you, and you ran into the bathroom, beelining for the furthest stall from sight.

You were grateful it wasn't coming out the front, you pathetically thought. You shakily popped open the medicine and opened one of the drinks Pluey gave you, and swiftly took the pills. "30 minutes until relief", the box promised. You sure hoped so. You leaned against the stall wall and shuddered. The cold stall wall was relieving against your feverish, hot body. This was awful.

After about twenty-five or so, you decided you really would rather camp at home for the day. You cleaned yourself up, flushed. You stood, lethargic, for a few more moments, steadying yourself against the door. The bathroom door swung open and you just about soiled yourself from the startle. You kept silent, somehow, heart like thunder in your ears, hiding behind the stall door.

"This fucking thing's so hot," Battat's voice. "I feel like I'm going to keel over," he panted to himself. "I really should add ventilation to this goddamn thing,"

What?

You could hear the sound of the sink turn on. You tried to be as silent as you could, climbing onto the toilet seat to peer over the stall doors.

You saw... Mike? At the sink, staring at himself.

Then he reached up.

And.

He.

Took.

Off.

His.

Head.

And Battat hung his head as he turned on the sink and splashed his face with water.

You dropped your bag of medicine, the drinks with a gasp.

He scrambled and put the - Mike's- head back on.

Your blood went cold. The room spun. You ducked and stumbled down.

"Who's there?!"

fuck fuck fuck fuck no no no no no this can't be happening no no no nonononono please say it isn't true thiscant be happening this cant be happening no nono

please nno. please. please. it can't be. Battat and Mike can't be the same guy. Nno. Pleasepleaseplease. God if youre thereplease wake me please

You probably would've thrown up if everything wasn't already squeezed out of you. Your head felt so light, a sickening feeling on top of the panic.

"I said, who's there?!"

You stepped out.

You shook like a leaf under his... well, not eyeless gaze. You knew now he could see under the mask.

"So when were you planning to tell me," your voice was incredibly stable, really, for someone seconds from fainting. Your horror, your panic, your shock was rapidly shifting into something ugly: rage.

You could hear him sharply inhale under the mask.

"Please... I can explain,"

"You deceived me," you accused, voice steeling itself into venom. The walls were blurry. Rage was keeping you standing. "When were you planning to say anything." It wasn't a question - it wasn't a statement either. It fell flat, lethargy's grip on you was still unrelenting.

"I promise I have a really good explaination," Battat raised his - Mike's - hands defensively. His voice was hoarse and you didn't care.

You stumbled, catching yourself on the stall. Please, you begged your body. Please don't give out until I'm home. Please.

"I fucked up," he croaked.

"You sure did." Your voice didn't hold the same waver your trembling legs did. Your stomach twisted and writhed. You prayed it could hold out just a bit longer.

"Please, let me-"

"Get out of my sight," you whispered.

He flinched. "Please-"

"Don't fucking speak to me," your eyes met his as he took off Mike's head again. "You. You knew. You're a sick fucking bastard-"

"This whole Mike thing isn't about you-"

"So WHY didn't you TELL ME," you snapped, your voice raising. "You took me out? In costume! And then had the audacity? To ask me the next day?! As YOURSELF if it went well?? Are you some kind of- some kind of-" you stammered. No. No. Control yourself, you can't let him see this breaking you.

You broke anyway.

"No wonder I liked you both so much," you spat, voice cracking, hoping it hurt him even half as much as it hurt you. "You're the same sick little man." You stormed past him, forgetting your medicine. You already took it anyway.

"Please, just-" he pleaded.

"Don't speak to me. Fuck you."

He didn't follow you. Your hot tears fell as you stalked to the elevators - stomach vibrating in agony with every step, your bones weakened and your hammering heart was the only thing keeping you moving at all. Your lungs heaved for air. You just needed to be home. Immediately. You wished you saw nothing, yet knowing the sickening truth made so many things snap together.

Why they both shared a cackle. Why Battat carried the same clipboard Mike always did. Why Mike was so cryptic recently. Why Battat grew increasingly expressive after you'd spend time with Mike. Why Battat became friendlier after you told Mike he scared you.

It was all one depraved man.

And he'd sat in your room.

He'd kissed you.

He'd haunted your dreams, your thoughts, your every waking moments.

He'd comfort you from anxiety about his other identity. Interchangably.

He'd switch out roles.

His "knack" for costumes. Of course. He lived a second life in one.

Had he just told you, you thought in anguish, surely you'd have understood. You'd have taken in his reasoning, his reveal, in good stride at any point prior to that date. Taking you on a date with a secret identity was just deplorable. Had he asked you as himself, and confessed, surely you'd have been happier. He didn't need to do all this.

But why would he even need to prance around as someone else? It made no sense. What the hell did that even mean with the cat and cowboy "Mike"s? You'd seen Battat yelling at the cat - surely a Shadowguy, you concluded, considering it's resistance to speaking. It made sense. The other had to be a Zapper - the accent and the body shape had you suspicious the first time, but you didn't question it. But now the pieces were rapidly snapping together. Did they also know? Were they aware of the stupid little cockroach romancing you? Was this all some big conspiracy, some big joke you weren't in on?

The thoughts spiralled in you like a whirlpool. You felt so, so sick. The elevator felt like eternity, both waiting for it and riding up it.

You shambled to your apartment, unlocked the door with trembling, fumbling claws and almost collapsed inside.

But not before locking the door.

And grabbing linen from your closet, to bunch up at the bottom of the door.

And checking every corner of the room in fear the sicko might've made it here first. Okay, that was paranoia speaking. You truly didn't know the extent of what he could do, or what he would do. It was better to take no chances.

You collapsed on the couch and sobbed - wailing to nobody in particular. You threw a tacky throw pillow across the room, using it to it's names sake. You wanted to die. On one hand, you weren't some nasty little thing prowling after two men at once. But on the other: you were played like a fiddle by one man. Was he testing you? Was it some sick game?

He knew your vulnerabilities, he was in your HOME, he kissed you, he dropped your guard down, it was all so sickening and disgusting. You felt taken advantage of. What possible excuse could he have that'd justify this? Could you even forgive him?

You kind of wanted to. You wanted to understand, deep down, but the shock of this revelation would have nauseating affects still. You needed time to calm down.

You cried. You cried and cried and cried. You cried until you gagged, then gave up on crying for a bit. Your lungs heaved for air and your eyes were swollen like never before.

Your stomach twisted violently again, leading you to launch yourself to the washroom.

You were absolutely spent. You cleaned yourself up, and decided it was safer to sleep on the bathroom floor this time - with a bundled up towel as your pillow. Your head spun, and you passed out from exhaustion, finally. You dreamt of your teeth falling out - one by one until they fell in twos, threes, fours. You tried to scream, but couldn't against the blackness.

You didn't wake again until your alarm vibrated your pocket.

You washed your face and hands.

You half-assedly brushed your teeth.

You skipped showering today.

You didn't know if TV World employees had a probation period or not regarding work. You decided to try stomaching today to not find out. Speaking of, you thought bitterly, your stomach felt fine now. You didn't bother changing your clothes. Who fucking cares, really. Whatever, man. Your stomach felt better, but everything else felt like a wreck. This was horrible. What kind of person would care about their looks after the discovery you'd made?

You felt hollow.

You sleepwalked your way downstairs, and sat as close to Mr. Tenna's desk as the bleachers allowed. You nodded absently as he inquired about your health and gushed about how excited he was to see you.

Elnina could tell you were despondent - she sat and merely squeezed your hand. You let a gloved hand hang beside her as she'd parked her wheelchair between the bleachers and Mr. Tenna's desk.

"You can tell me about it tomorrow, I'll tell Mr. Tenna I need you, to give you an out," she whispered. "You don't have to say anything today. I can tell by the looks of you."

Catatonic and emptily, you nodded. Her hand was your lifeboat.

Battat made himself small.

You could barely stand to look at him.

But Mr. Tenna, the ever-oblivious, expected you both to practice the fucking ballroom dance today.

You wished you'd called out.

Battat looked just as mortified, but kept his gaze averted.

You both twirled around - to the untrained eye, nobody would've ever known something was deeply, horribly wrong as you both expertly maneuvered. The close contact felt dirty to you now.

Battat made no attempt to whisper or make a sly joke or anything. At the bare minimum, the sick bastard at least respected your wishes to not speak to you.

Then, the Zapper playing the antagonist, had to rehearse the scene of fighting Battat. You'd wished desperately to not be standing just off to the side, but to be back beside Elnina - her reassuring squeezes to your hand being your life support. You felt feverish with dread when it came to the part of you having to cry over beast's - Battat's - body had to be acted out.

You embraced his limp body on the backstage floor, with everyone watching. He 'came back to life' as a normal prince. He didn't make eye contact.

You held each other in a "passionate" embrace, claws digging into his back.

It looked convincing. Even if his jaw was tight with discomfort.

In most cases, you knew stage kisses didn't need to be real. A kiss beside the lips could suffice. So your gloved hand gingerly took his face and pulled him into a real one - the same drawn out one from every iteration of this story. His eyes met yours once, the pain in them reserved for only you.

To the audience, you looked in love.

You were good actors for the audience.

Mr. Tenna was all too unaware. He seemed delighted at how you two fit together so perfectly - he was particularly pleased you 'both' opted for a real kiss instead of a fake one.

You could see Elnina frowning in her wheelchair beside the bleachers.

You were glad you didn't eat at all today.

You shrunk back to Elnina, and Battat shrunk back to whatever corner he'd tried to hide himself in. You wished of other places he'd go back to.

Elnina tapped your leg and motioned for you to scoot closer to her.

You obeyed, finding only the faintest relief someone was looking out for you.

"You don't need to say anything right now," she reiterated her sentiment from earlier. "Come to the sixth floor tomorrow at nine, in the morning." She spoke in a hushed tone. "You don't have to be around him."

You tearfully nodded.

He kept away from you, respecting your distance.

Chapter 8: Sleepover

Chapter Summary

Elnina and Lanino decide to be your parents, and the thought keeps you safe.

A shorter chapter!! But I wanted to focus solely on our favourite weather duo 💙💛

Nine in the morning.

Sixth floor.

You stood pensively outside Elnina and Lanino's door - it was very obvious which door was theirs. It was covered in clouds and moons.

Mike's door, fortunately, was a lot more isolated - almost the furthest end of the hallway. If looks could kill, your glare would explode the room.

It meant nothing. All the feelings you'd felt flutter and flourish in you felt decayed, rotten, broken. You didn't enjoy feeling this way. You almost wished you could rewind time and enjoy Mike's kiss a bit more before the pain struck - the fantasy of Battat seeming to grow softer towards you, his sturdy arms holding yours as you danced.

You couldn't make sense of his actions, nor did you really want to, now. You were devastated. You were just glad you hadn't seen him since yesterday... and planned to keep the gap wide for a while. Your stomach churned knowing now you'll be partnered romantically in a performance with him: the coworker who will be still training you after all of this was said and done. Who may always be in close proximity to you. You grit your teeth at the thought. The door swung open, and cherry coloured gloves pulled you inside, and squickly slammed the door shut behind you.

Lanino picked you up in a hug and twirl; your feet flying off the ground, a gasp escaped your mouth. Your brooding thoughts erased at the flamboyant greeting.

"Little red!" He sang. "You've been such a good friend to my dearest, sweetest dewdrop-!"

He finally set you down, and you wobbled as you regained your footing.

"It's really nothing," you wheezed. "I couldn't just leave her Alone in the Green Room,"

"She's right this way!" He singsonged as he lead you to her, grabbing your gloved hand - tiny in his - and leading you to a nearby room.

Their place was HUGE.

Easily thrice or four times the size of your own. Decked out in fluffy white couches with moon shaped pillows, blue raindrop wallpapers, potted plants. Everything was blue, white, yellow, with the occasional orange or red accent. They lived in their own weather aesthetic - even the calendar hanging on the fridge was decorated with pictures of just. Weather events. Rain, sunshine, hurricanes... you supposed you should've expected it. Even the carpets were black with sun, moon, cloud and star patterns. Massive windows lined the apartment - and while dark worlds had a perpetually black sky, the snowfall outside really added to the abundance in weather visuals.

"Red Velvet, darling!" Elnina called. You could see her having twisted herself on the couch to peer over at you as you entered what appeared to be a home theatre. Goodness, these two had everything and a half. The only other room in your studio apartment was literally a bathroom and the tiniest of closets. Elnina wasn't joking when she said their living quarters were larger - and cozier - than Pippinses.

You supposed it made sense - the Weather Duo recieved preferential treatment even over that jerk because they were Mr. Tenna's most beloved broadcasters. They brought in the most views, consistent ratings, their charming faces and chitchat beloved by all.

Where that cosplaying jerk was Mr. Tenna's shadow and right hand, the Weather Duo were the second in command - they had even more say over what was aired, and all employees had to bend to them. They did not abuse this privilege, however. They were often kind and friendly, fraternizing with whoever took the time to get to know them.

Elnina eagerly patted the seat beside her.

You made your way over, a slight skip in your step. You thanked Lanino for letting you in before sitting beside your friend.
"I'm so excited you came," Elnina cooed, pulling you into a hug. "I told Mr. Tenna I needed help and company around the house today and choose you." She released you with a sheepish grin. "I thought you needed the break."

"Really good timing on your end," you smiled weakly. "Who knew the entire next day would be horrible?"

"Oh, sweetheart." She frowned. "I totally want to know what catastrophe has hurt you so." She did a little dramatic flick of the wrist, but her words remained sincere.

"It's a long story." You exhaled. Your gaze fixed onto your velvet gloves. "I feel humiliated."

Her lip pursed into a pout. "Do you wanna talk about it? And afterwards we just spend time relaxing?"

You nodded.

She leaned back comfortably, and tossed a star-shaped pillow towards you. "Spill, doll."

You told her everything - from your initial meeting of Mike, to Battat. The green die's initial standoffish behaviour and how you sought comfort in Mike. How his different shapes

confused you, how Battat seemed so comfortable yelling at "Mike".

You confessed how you'd confided in Mike about your initial fear of Battat. And how, the next day, Battat started making a more concentrated effort to win you over. How you'd been basically at the whim of him switching costumes - finding yourself hopelessly... attracted to both.

You'd denied it, initially.

Your interest in Battat.

You'd dismissed it anytime Elnina teased, anytime Pippinses stared, no matter what Battat did. You told Elnina how on the night of her accident, Battat guided you home and held your head against his chest. How you begun getting along, how Tenna singling you out as the new stars had pushed Battat into finally being your friend. How guilty it made you feel and how you'd tried to deny it even to yourself.

The date.

Lanino brought champagne for the two of you as you spoke. You sipped it generously in hopes you could control your emotions.

The cryptic commentary from Mike, the kiss, the swirling anxiety the next day. How Battat asked you about the date - that widened Elnina's eyes in particular, for some reason, - and how he proceeded to comfort you and taught you to ballroom dance. You admitted the dreams you had, how you'd found youself increasingly flustered in his presence.

You didn't mention him measuring you. You didn't think she needed to know how much that sensation lingered as you went to sleep the night he did.

Then the next day, the wreckage.

She frowned the whole way through - to your surprise, Elnina was a very intent listener. She made little to no commentary and simply let you speak. She would occasionally lean forward and squeeze your hand, or shift positions to listen more comfortably, but she was set on letting you let it out to her. You felt relieved when she'd occasionally shoo out Lanino for bits she deemed too "private" for her husband to hear.

You didn't really care whether he did or didn't hear, but her committment to making sure you were comfortable would make you stop and sniffle.

The hard part came. Describing the incident in the bathroom.

You shook as you recounted it to her.

"I was already feeling sick, and awful. Of course. I pushed into one of the general bathrooms and was waiting for my medicine to kick in... and I heard someone come in, so I stayed hidden, because I felt too awful to want to be seen.

He came in, and I heard his voice, so I peeked over the stall... and he was Mike... u-until he wasn't. It's l-like everything fell apart immediately," hot tears fell from your eyes. "I felt lied to. So I lashed out."

She hummed sympathetically, scooting forward to gently wipe your tears and sat closer to you. She leaned against you gently, the smell of her perfume taking over your sense of smell. "Understandably."

"I told him fuck you and I left, but. I just. I don't understand," you hiccuped. You wiped at your eyes. "I never want to speak to him again, b-but..." your voice began to tremble more.

"But...?" She encouraged.

"I keep thinking, what if I can't forgive him? I-it scares me so much." You hugged yourself with one arm tightly while the other desperately tried to keep catching tears.

"Oh, velvet, doll." She sounded emotional, too, at the sight of you struggling not to fully break into hysteric sobs. She could tell you were deeply wounded from the event.

"I kissed him to hurt him," you croaked.

Her nodded solemnly.

"It probably wasn't right, but... I wanted him to feel bad," you drew your knees together.

Elnina wrapped her long arms around you. Her hands gently rubbed your shoulders and the back of your neck as she held you tightly. It felt nice. You leaned into her and cried as she spoke.

"Oh, doll... it's gonna be okay," she soothed. "I want to think he didn't want to hurt you."

You wailed pathetically into her shoulder. "Then why didn't he just tell me?"

She hummed sadly. "I just don't know, dewdrop. My little raincloud. He must have his reasons."

"What if they're shitty reasons?" You whimpered.

"Then they're shitty reasons." She responded simply, refusing to let you go as she gently rocked you. You melted into her embrace, choosing to just hiccup and whimper out your cries.

You both stayed like that for a while.

It was some weight off your shoulders - someone knowing everything. And holding you as you cried about it.

Then you cried more.

"E-Elnina," you sobbed. "Th-thank you f-for b-b-being here,"

"Noo, don't thank me," she shushed you gently. "When I invited you over, I thought you just needed a friend, but now... I think you needed this more than I thought, and I'm glad someone's here for you." Her own voice wobbled. "You're just, so sweet, and so nice, and, and, and-"

She wailed too.

"It hurts me to see you so heartbroken!"

Her embrace got tighter.

After you'd both collected yourself, she wiped her eyes with a handkerchief, offering you a matching one.

"I always thought there was multiple Mikes," she sniffled. "But nobody pays it any mind as long as it pleases Tennie. I think if you talk things out," she mused dramatically for a moment. "You should let him explain. There must be a reason."

You hugged yourself and stared downward.

"What if I don't want to talk to him...?" Your voice was so, so small.

"Then you don't have to."

Lanino poked his head back in.

"Are you two interested in any snacks?"

He brought in a charcuterie board, and your eyes widened a bit at the selection. All sorts of cheeses, slices of salami, proscuitto, ham, crackers, grapes, berries, nuts, sliced vegetables, olives, and dried fruits. It smelled heavenly.

You'd never really seen anything like it, but Elnina responded casually. "Oh! Just what I was hoping for," she purred, her emotions seemingly relaxed again. "Thank you, my sunshine, and moonshine." She eased back into the couch for a moment, before leaning forward again to examine her options of snack.

He blushed vividly - his cheeks turning a bright cherry. "Of course! I didn't want to intrude, so I just..." he smiled shyly at her as if she was the only one in the room, as if he was seeing her for the first time everytime his eyes landed on her. "Wanted to cheer you both up! I'm not as good with words," he pronounced dramatically. "But I am good with food!"

She giggled and met his shyness with a playful purr. "You are truly the brightest star in my sky, dear!! Would you be able to help us find something to play? I think we've cried enough," she giggled flirtatiously at her husband.

"On it, mi amore," with a flaming blush and a comically butler-like bow, he rushed over to the television before pulling out a game console.

Elnina took back your attention as he set it up, sifting through the games they had. Her sapphire eyes locked onto your ruby eyes.

"Hopefully these are the last tears you shed!" She said resolutely. "If he wants to make things right, I think he will, but even if he doesn't...!" She puffed her chest with dramatic flourish. "You will persevere, my little raincloud!! Also. Is it okay I call you that, by the way? Like, you're red velvet, but you're also, like, my little raincloud baby. I love you so dearly and you're like. A sad little rainy cloud baby. But you're my little sad rainy cloud baby."

Her awkward over explaining made you giggle, wiping your face dry. "You have called me every sweet name in the book but you're worried about that?"

"Of COURSE, darling!" She gasped. "I'm like, basically claiming you as my honourary child! My cloud!"

"I'm an adult," you giggled. The champagne was probably influcing those giggles to come out louder than you intended. "Like, a grown adult, I know Pippinses are cute, but-"

"Every adult is still someone's baby," she said sweetly, grabbing both your gloved hands firmly in her azure palms. "I want to be your family, so you know you always have someone to come to, at any hour, any time, any weather. Any storm you're in, I will be there with an umbrella for you, little cloud. Little red velvet cloud." She finished with a loving smile.

Your lip quivered and your eyes watered again. The tears began again. Damn it. She was becoming a mom figure so fast - it made you miss your own mom. Her care meant everything to you in that moment.

"Hey!" Lanino's voice tugged you both away from a pending waterworks festival.

"We have a lot, but, I think this multiplayer would be fun," he handed it to you. Elnina peered over your shoulders.

You sorta recognized it - it featured video game characters from all sorts of games, in a multiplayer brawl type setting.

"I think you two need some laughter, now," he chuckled. His eyes twinked kindly.

"This is such a fun one!! I love the pink singing kitty," Elnina sang. "I always kick Lanino's arse!"

"Oh!! Not true!!" He gasped. "I'm an utmost skilled player!!"

You laughed and agreed to play.

You picked the green boy from the forest to play as - with a sword and shield, and a handsome face. He stood out to you.

You three played games for hours - including out for racing games, and party games. Lanino would occasionally get more refreshments. Periodically, he would make sure you both had everything you needed.

You were susprisingly good at most of the games - but you all took turns kicking each others asses, play fighting about it, laughing wildly and cracking jokes. The only tears left were that of laughter.

You wished the night could last forever - the green die didn't cross your mind at all as, eventually, Lanino and Elnina decided on a scary movie before bed. The two were scaredy cats but loved the thrill. You had the nerves of steel, and giggled when they'd leap into each other's arms and scream. But a good jumpscare here or there would get you too.

At some point, however, you began to feel tired as the night waned on. Hours of playing and getting scared and laughing and having a good time had brought a sense of comfort and belonging you'd never felt to this level. You leaned your head against the couch, and soon, you were enveloped by dreams of clouds and stars. You were at ease.

When you awoke, it had to be morning. Probably.

You were wrapped up in a dark blue blanket with a cute raincloud pattern. Your shoes had been gently tucked off and folded where your feet would be if you sat upright - but they were tucked beside Elnina as she slept across from you on the couch, wrapped in a blue blanket adorned with suns, stars, and moons. Whoever removed your shoes probably did so with not kicking Elnina in mind while you shared a couch as a bed, your feet tucked behind her knees.

Lanino was sprawled across a large, worn and leathery armchair. His shoulders glowed gently, flames illuminating the dimly lit room, and you thanked whatever higher power made it so the flames emitted from his body didn't seem capable of igniting anything, just humbly glowing.

You smiled to yourself. These two had taken such good care of you. You were deeply glad at the feeling in your chest - like you'd finally had someone look at your wounds, and, for now, bandaged you up with compassion and care.

You smiled as you fell back asleep - slumber gently tugging you somewhere safe for just a while longer.

Chapter 9: Silk and satin

Chapter Summary

> I've discovered that "chapter notes" on mobile seem to bug the hell out, so here I will admit I've been so busy. But I write in my free time, or when I can't sleep, so fortunately I can update frequently when I'm not working or visiting family. I hope you enjoy! Lotsa tension for you to feast on here.
>
> I had a lot of inspiration listening to Spirit Lead Me (piano version) by Clavier these last few chapters. I've been musing on how I think Battat's voice would sound and I'm still stuck.

The night with Elnina and Lanino boosted you - you showered in the morning, washed your face and brushed your teeth, enjoyed breakfast with the duo.

"Come back anytime," Elnina lovingly squeezed your shoulders. Lanino stood beside her, smiling kindly on you. "You're family. You can come at anytime, and we'll be here. You'll get through any weather, no matter the severity."

Your heart felt refreshed. You had to go to work (or just, more rehearsals). You dreaded it, but the morale boost from your newfound parental figures made your steps more stable, and you kept reminding yourself:

I will survive.

You made your way to your own apartment first, and found a bag outside the door.

Your dropped medicine.

You shook a bit. You decided to just... bring it inside. Anyone could've brought it here had they known you were sick on Friday - and everyone saw how lethargic you'd looked. You unlocked the door, picked it up, and set it on your table.

You peeked inside. The drinks all still there, unopened aside from the one you'd taken with your medicine. The blister pack your medicine came with was also untouched - all aside from the empty blister you'd popped to take the medicine.

You had a suspicion who did it, but decided to believe anyone else did it. You weren't ready to face him, let alone speak to him, even with your strength being restored.

You decided to go through with what you came home for - to change into clean clothes before heading downstairs. Donning a new set of black and red clothes with your signature

golden shimmer, faced yourself in the mirror. Your eyes looked less tired. You looked healthier, fortunately.

But fear still gripped you - anxiety twisted in your stomach, and you tried to desperately not allow yourself to feel any worse. Elnina and her husband Lanino worked so hard to help you feel better during your heartbreak. You decided you would be above any more spite, but you'd still need to keep a distance.

You made your way downstairs.

Backstage was bustling as usual. The first one to notice you, actually, was Mr. Tenna.

His screen brightened, and he beckoned you towards him with his finger.

His size still intimidated you, but the way he instantly perked at the sight of you, before his expression shifted into a kind smile reassured you. He extended a hand and lifted you onto his desk.

"Little star!" Word art appeared around him as he greeted you. "How are you feeling? Hopefully better?" He rested his massive head on his hand.

"Much, yes," you nodded. "I appreciate you letting me go get rest, Mr. Tenna." You gave a small bow.

His kind smile grew wider, seemingly delighted. "Oh, wonderful! I was so worried, you know," he pursed his lips. "It's been a while since I've seen any of my staff get so sick. Much less one of my stars... I'm just... ahh...!! So glad you're looking so much better."

Wow. You'd never really realized he paid this close attention - maybe it was your fear of fifteen feet tall televisions, the first impression of him scaring the daylights out of you. But he'd remained steadfast in his kindness, even if he could be strict with his standards. It was nice to realize just how kindly the darkners here viewed you.

"Thank you, Mr. Tenna," your voice quavered a little. "I'm sorry I was gone an extra da-"

"No! Don't sweat it! As long as my little star comes back!" The CRT beamed. "I heard glowing reviews about you from Mike. You're a real five stars!"

Your stomach sank. He had no idea, really. A small part of you wanted to know what exactly was said to Mr. Tenna - and if he knew who Mike really was. You thought of Elnina's words and decided not to mention it.

"Oh... are you still sick?" Mr. Tenna's voice caught your attention.

"Oh! Me? No, no!" You reassured frantically. "The medicine just.... makes you drowsy for a couple days! I am still good to be here today." You hit him with your best smile.

That reassured him - the palpable relief on his expression told you he earnestly didn't know what was going on underneath his nose, and he could only kind of see the effects it had on you. You'd rather pretend it was residual illness.

"Wonderful!" His screen flickered with relief. "You're a real good one, y'know? Okay, okay. I've stolen you long enough. I'll set you down now." He held a hand, palmside up, for you to walk onto as he made himself a bit bigger in size to elevate you. "Break a leg, kid."

You stepped delicately onto his large, gloved palm, and he just as delicately returned you to the ground.

You caught sight of Elnina, who shot you a reassuring smile.

You tried to not look for Battat, but you betrayed yourself. You scanned for green anyway. Nothing. You didn't know if you felt relief or not as your eyes made their way back to your cloudy friend. Her face pinched sympathetically.

You made your way over to her quickly.

Lanino was gathering his usual group of house supplies to practice, and Elnina had finally begun walking a bit more - albeit wobbly.

A red Pippins was quietly instructing Shadowguys on their musical number nearby, the sound being kind of relaxing for you as you idly stood near the Weather Duo.

"Oh, yes, everyone," Mr. Tenna clapped his large hands. "The costume department has been working very hard - you'll be receiving costumes tomorrow to provide feedback. Then we start dress rehearsals on Thursday."

Before you could feel your heart sink, azure hands grabbed you.

"Ohh, isn't that exciting!" Elnina latched onto your bicep. "I'm so excited to see what yours look like!! You get the biggest variety!" Her eyes twinkled excitedly.

"Hahaha, same," you stammered. "I wasn't sure about... all dresses, but, I am playing Belle, not myself."

"Ohh you'll do lovely," she purred. "I bet you look good in any colour."

"I can't wait for mine," Lanino added.

"You already look the part," you elbowed him playfully. "Elnina gets to come home to her own Lumière every day."

This earned giggles from Elnina, which turned into hysteric wheezing as she wobbily held onto you so she wouldn't fall over. You wrapped an arm around her to help keep her up, your own laughter spilling at your stupid joke. It was hardly funny - but Elnina's laughter was contagious.

"So it's true!" Lanino played into the bit, causing you two to laugh more. He struggled not to laugh, too, as he put on his best French accent. "I come home to light up my wife's life! My deepest pride... my greatest pleasuere," the accent teetered toward extra dramatic.

You cracked up and Elnina was only further elated by her lovesick partner.

"Oh-!! My light...!! You're so funny," she rasped between giggles. "But it's true!! You light up my life!!"

The two giggled hysterically, with you between them. "Oh my god. Get a roooooom," you teased. This only made it harder for the two to breathe.

The dressing room door opened, and from the corner of your eye, you saw Battat walk out, and freeze at the sight of you. Before he quickly retreated back inside and closed the door, abandoning whatever he came out for.

You looked away.

The day went on as usual, but you practiced more scenes between you and the Zapper playing Gaston. Elnina needed a cane to partake, just to be safe, but Mr. Tenna called her off the "stage" (the floor they were pretending was the stage, for practicing purposes) to get her to continue resting. He wanted her to take it easy as possible until dress rehearsals, when she should be better walking on her own. You felt relief remembering it was only a bad sprain, and not anything worse. It felt so long ago since she fell, but it'd been less than a full week ago at this point.

Battat didn't come out again, and Mr. Tenna, for some reason, didn't ask about the male lead hanging out in the dressing room all day. Maybe it was because he was helping with costumes, you remembered as you glanced at the door again. You shook off the thought.

You retreated to the cafeteria for lunch, and seated yourself with the other Pippinses, chewing absentmindedly on your fries while they chattered on about the gacha machines in the ranked rooms, wins and losses, and their excitement to get this play thing over with so they can return to work normally. They didn't prod you much - you didn't usually join them, so they opted to not scare you off. Sitting and eavesdropping was fine enough with you.

"So you feelin better, bud?" One asked.

"Yeah, I think it was food poisoning." You responded, mouth half full.

"Rough. I had it last year," they pursed their lip in sympathy. "Puked for days. I don't eat the steak TV Dinners anymore."

"Wait that's like. The best one." A Pippin a few seats over interjected.

"No, it's basically poison!" They spun their attention to the other Pippin. "Just because YOU like slop-"

"You're the one with like, no taste, dude-"

"It's LITERALLY slop! What is wrong with you?!"

Arguing broke out as the table began debating over which TV Dinners were or weren't slop, but you found yourself entertained by the chatter, occasionally laughing here or there at a

quip or witty comment. You noticed a Pippins beside you, curiously eyeing your food over your shoulder.

"Hey, what're you eatin'?"

"Fries," you answered simply.

"Yeah, no, I see that, but what's on them?"

"Gravy and cheese," you spoke through your food.

"Can I try?" The Pippins asked curiously. They tilted their head as they examined your food.

You decided why not. You picked up a few with your fork, making sure you had some gravy and cheese on them, and held it out. They took it as daintily as they could to avoid touching your fork - a small act you were secretly grateful for. Their crimson eyes lit up.

"So if I went and ordered fries," they began, sounding a little excited, "I can ask for gravy and cheese? And get what you have here?"

You nodded. "It's not on the menu, but yeah, they do it if you ask."

"Yooo, thank you so much! I owe ya one!" They bounded off excitedly to hassle the Pip and Shadowguy running the cafeteria. You smiled.

After lunch, you made your way backstage again.

Battat was hopping off Mr. Tenna's desk, before noticing you and quickly retreating again. You averted your gaze.

The rest of the day, thankfully, went without incident. He kept out of your way, and you kept out of his just as easily. You stuck by Elnina and Lanino like glue. You wondered if things would be like this forever. Tension, awkwardness. Keeping his secret. Your heart racing then sinking at the sight of him. You wouldn't admit to yourself that you missed him. Spending time with others made the pain less visceral - but in the back of your mind, it was always there.

You kind of wished you could've stayed another night with the duo, but you decided you wanted your own space again as you headed home for the end of the day.

You got inside and stood idly inside your apartment. You looked around and spotted the medicine bag on your counter again and sighed. You moved to put it away, put the drinks in the fridge, have it finally out of your sight.

You flopped onto your couch. You've never touched the TV in your place. You picked up the remote, and turned it on - flipping channels idly, until you settled on channel three. Some gameshow of Mr. Tenna's, where he'd been making contestants do ridiculous physical challenges. Trying to quickly run an obstacle course over pools, try to eat at a table as the floor tilted increasingly, trying to find what objects in the room were or weren't edible. You ignored him asking "Mike" for effects, and zoned out. You fell asleep early.

When you woke up, the TV was running some morning broadcast. Oops. You'd really just come home from work, fallen asleep, and stayed asleep til morning. You pulled your phone out.

Six twenty-five in the morning.

Might as well get ready for the day.

You ran through the morning routine: a quick shower, drank some chocolate milk before brushing your teeth, fresh clothes. You needed to do laundry, soon, you thought. You'd ask Elnina about where the washers were later today, if you could remember to. You steeled yourself in front of the mirror again: reminding yourself you'll get through today. Any weather.

You made the entirety of yesterday, and the day before, without speaking to Battat. The idea felt a bit easier to stomach, as long as you avoided him like the plague and constantly stuck by others and rushed home from work and found something to make noise in the background and you didn't let your mind wander off and you kept yourself constantly busy and and and and.

You shuddered a sigh, and left for work.

He was nowhere in sight. The cat Mike laid on Mr. Tenna's desk, lazily tossing yarn in the air as it purred to the boss. Mr. Tenna was engrossed in an adult romance novel while darkners filled the room, breaking off into the usual rehearsal groups.

Elnina and Lanino found you quickly, where you sat perched on a few boxes meant to be part of the set.

"My red velvet raincloud!" Elnina sang, reaching up to give you an awkward hug. "How'd you rest?"

"Much better since spending time with y'all," you smiled down at her. "We should do that again sometime, if that's okay with you,"

She immediately lit up, more than she already was.

"Yes!! Yes yes yes!! We can do a movie marathon- or even more games- ohh!!! We can bake a cake!!"

You beamed excitedly at her. "Anytime! As long as it's not intruding on you and Lanino-"

"It is NOT!!! At all!!!" She playfully affronted. Lanino nodded enthusiastically behind her. "Our door is always open to heal your heartache!"

You sputtered. "My heartache-?!"

She laughed loudly.

The morning went on as usual, until Battat opened the dressing room door again. He'd been calling actors in and out - you tried stubbornly to ignore him, until he called on you. He stammered your name.

"It'll be okay," Elnina whispered. "He's just making sure everyone's costumes fit, you can run back out to us as soon as you're done. We'll be right here." She squeezed your hand. You nodded weakly.

You made your way to him, eyes fixated past him. He kept his gaze averted.

He closed the door behind you as you entered, leaving just you two alone.

"There's a booth right there," he said quietly. "Just go inside. You have four costumes to try. Let me know if they fit."

You wordlessly nodded as he handed you a neatly-folded pile of fabrics.

You made your way to the booth, and pulled aside the curtain. There wasn't much room, but you'd make do. You poked your head out at him to make sure he wasn't going to move.

Your heart hammered - it was your first time getting a good look at him in days. Even with poor vision, his green poncho, gloves and tie easily stood out among all the darkners here. But those were blurrier, distant sightings.

He eased himself up onto the counter, pulled up his legs, and buried his head in his arms. He seemed thinner.

You silently pulled your own head back into the stall.

You stripped down and examined the clothes. You'd try the casual, normal outfit first. As you unwrapped it, two pale blue gloves fell out. You tested them first - they fit perfectly. Not too loose, not too tight. You slipped the outfit over your head and buttoned up the chest before tying the apron around the front. You didn't need to change shoes, fortunately, since all your costumes were of the pull-over variety.

You stepped out to get a look in the mirror.

It looked beautiful on you. You had no doubt this was his handiwork - Battat had measured you, and while you knew other darkners helped with the costumes, you'd noticed he'd seemed to take charge since the incident. Not a stitch was misaligned, not a corner too tight. It fit you like it was meant for you, comfortable like you could lounge in this forever. Someone, or maybe he had, embroidered little flowers at the bottom of the dress - a splash of colour to accent your eyes. It was made exclusively of a soft, cottony fabric that felt comfortable against your skin.

He didn't move a muscle when he simply asked, "does it fit?"

"Yes." You wanted to sound curt. You wanted to sound cold. But you couldn't help the soft awe that still gently poked through your own walls. "I still gotta try on the others."

"Take your time."

You hummed awkwardly before returning to the stall. The 'dinner' outfit was next. A green pull-over, too.

It was a fancier material - mostly silk, you noticed. It slid on comfortably. You felt your exposed neck and collar and shuddered a little. The gloves, too, another perfect fit. They were darker than the rest, but still a similar cold green hue. You noted he'd taken inspiration from the movie as you stepped out and examined yourself.

He didn't look up, either.

"The green also fits," you commented quietly.

"Good to know."

You went back in the stall. It was the same case for the 'winter' dress and cloak, too. He'd taken care to make it a similar material to your daily clothes - red, velvety, with a golden shimmer, except instead of your black trim, it was replaced with a fluffy white faux fur on the cloak that was especially comfortable to the touch. The gloves were just a little bit thicker, meant to keep your claws warm. The inside had a similar soft, warm faux fur layer but in black. The idea of stealing the cloak for the winter crossed your mind, but you didn't know if it was possible to get away with it. But you liked it especially. He lined the pockets in red plaid.

The dress was intended to be worn again in another scene, seperate from the outdoor winter scene. So it doubled as an indoor dress, but the cloak made it look thicker and more "wintery" when paired together. You liked the thought put into it.

You commented your approval, he didn't respond with more than a hum.

Finally: the gown. You'd folded everything almost as neatly as he had.

It was a sunflower yellow, full of ruffles and layers. You didn't know you'd made a noise until you heard him ask, "something wrong?"

"Uh... the corset..." you mumbled.

"Do... should I get someone to help?"

"Uhh..." you felt your jaw tighten. "No. I can do it."

"I can help if you want." He sighed.

"Sure. I don't need it but sure."

You did need the help. You were just stubborn.

You heard him jump down, and cautiously make his way to you. "Stay still," he quietly instructed.

You tried to not shudder under his touch. Or lean into it. His claws expertly weaved the lacing, one hand occasionally pressing on your back to tighten them. "This is s'posed to be kind of firmer fitting. If you can't breathe just say so." His awkward attempt at an apology for the discomfort.

Lacing it was more uncomfortable than actually wearing it. He eased the hoop skirt over you, then the petticoat layers, and a big shimmery silk skirt, filled with gentle ruffles, but nothing terribly overbearing. It had a very thin, lacy material on the outside that someone had carefully and meticulously sewn rhinestones onto to make it glitter under the light, much like sunlight sparkling on water.

He then gently turned you around, gaze still not meeting yours, as he fixed a bodice - seperate from the corset and skirts, you learned - onto you, tying it at the front, and weaved your arms under the off-the-shoulder straps of satin. Your gloves were meant to start "hidden" underneath the off the shoulder straps. Your neck and shoulders were fully exposed.

He stepped back to examine his work. You couldn't help the blush stubbornly painting your features - you didn't think he'd commit to fully dressing you. He turned you around. Then again, to face him. You at least appreciated whatever personal affairs between you was wiped from his demeanour. It was clear to you this was something he actually took pride in, and was capable of being professional with, no matter what personal storm brewed between you both.

"You need a neck piece." He said flatly. "Take a few steps back."

You unthinkingly obeyed, letting him do his thing.

He turned and opened a smaller drawer off to the side on one of the vanities - and poked through it as he collected a small handful of what looked like necklaces. He then turned and held them up from a distance, facing you. He was muttering something under his breath as he discarded a few back into the drawer, until one finally pleased him. He walked back to you. It was a simple gold chain with a heart shaped diamond, meant to rest delicately on your collarbone. "Nothing grand, but it suits you, so it's fine. I thought it looked too bare," He hummed as he strode forward to fix it on you. "I don't think anyone will care, but still."

You turned to the mirror again. You'd never imagined anyone could make a Pippins look like a princess, like royalty - but you supposed only a Pippins had the eye to do this.

You looked ethereal. You couldn't even form words as you stared at yourself.

"Is it comfortable? Does everything fit?" He asked. His nerves finally crept back into his voice. "I uh... worked really hard on these."

"I can tell."

The tension could be cut with a knife - you still wanted to kill him, being forced to interact with him and so intimately did things to you that you couldn't really identify. But earnestly, you were blown away by his handiwork.

"I think I'm done," you said suddenly.

He nodded. "Yeah."

He helped you take off the necklace, and waited for you to untie the bodice before he loosened the corset. He stepped back to let you do the rest, and you made your way back to the booth. You stood silently, swallowed thickly and leaned against the wooden walls of the dressing room stall as your eyes filled with tears. You stayed there for a moment as they fell. You hated this. You hated how natural it felt to be around him even after he'd decieved you in such a personal, betraying way. You couldn't withhold the single shuddering sigh before you changed back into your normal Pippins uniform, the red and black cotton and velvet feeling like you finally had your safety blanket back on.

You stepped out, and moved past him, but your hand stayed on the doorhandle for a moment.

The silence hung heavily between you two.

You decided to break it again, just once, your eyes fixated on the doorhandle wrapped by your gloved claws.

"You did a good job. Thank you." Your voice was weakened as you tried to hide the fact you were struggling not to cry more. You'd only barely composed yourself. It hurt it hurt it hurt it hurt. You felt like your bleeding heart could be pierced through and seen only by his eyes as you felt his gaze burn into your back.

He only hummed in response.

You left the room, and closed the door behind you.

Elnina hobbled quickly to you, and guided you back to your group. "Did it go okay?"

"I hate everything," you whimpered.

"Oh, raincloud... was he rude? Do you want me and Lanino to go-"

"No, no. He was professional and polite," you tried to discreetly wipe a tear. "It made me feel worse somehow."

She squeezed you gently. "I know. It's okay."

It was another 15 minutes before he emerged, puffy eyed, calling for another actor to come in for fittings.

That night, you dreamt you were dancing alone - you dreamt you were spinning and twirling. The room was empty, lit only by the candlelight from little sconces on the walls. It was beautiful and otherworldly. Despite the empty room, you felt a deep sorrow, and a lonely green gaze.

Chapter 10: The talk

Chapter Summary

> You try to talk with Battat.
>
> (I liken the reader & Battat as that scene from Dumb and Dumber when they aren't speaking, and "making love out of nothing at all" plays. They're just idiots, yearning, and struggling with feelings. They will get there, even if it's rocky at first).

Dress rehearsals.

You dreaded it, really. Now the production was at the stage of practicing in chronological order, in costume, so everyone could prepare for the final show.

You'd learnt it was not only going to be a live broadcast, but darkners from different worlds were invited to sit in the live audience. Mostly Cyber City darkners, due to their locality, but the thought scared you a little. You knew vaguely that Mr. Tenna and "Mike" had been discussing it - which made Battat's commitments to his role, the costumes (specifically yours), and whatever Mike duties entailed more... sympathetic. You couldn't help but feel a twinge bad for him, despite everything. He looked wrung out.

And you still weren't ready to talk, as much as you wanted to know what was going on.

You'd finally seen his "Beast" costume, and you were impressed to say the least. Imposingly large (you realized he was on stilts), long, with shaggy, uneven fur that still looked natural - like a ragged animal. Long claws and horns. The mouth moved mechanically - his eyes visible from inside the throat so he could see at all. You wondered how he got it to move.

Ripped clothes, resembling 18th century noble attire. Damn. He put his research and skill into it. The forearms worked as extra balance - the beast had to move quickly and animal-like, so being able to drop on all fours to accomplish that was better than hobbling around awkwardly on stilts. It was hard to see what he did with the back feet, but it looked like he had meticulously tried to make it so the toes and claws could move only a certain amount - so dropping a bit forward didn't cause his feet to slip out and fall, but rather the claws could stay on the floor for balance. The long tail hung loosely behind him.

He was a mastermind with costumes, really.
It was certainly imposing - he ambled around awkwardly, at first, before quickly getting the hang of movement. You really wanted to see the inside - and how he'd managed to control the beasts hands, knowing damn well Battat, a five and a half feet tall Pippins, was under half as large as the suit he was in. There was no way he could do it unless he was using strings or some kind of puppeteering. Everything, you realized, must've been incredibly meticulously

planned and crafted. You wondered if he had help - maybe one of his friends had sewing skills or he had some of the costume department help, because between that and your costumes, the only way he could accomplish this was if he simply didn't sleep.

A small part of you genuinely feared the latter was true - for his eyes were incredibly sunken in, heavy with deep purple bags darkening his eyelids. He was sluggish whenever out of costume, as if he were channeling whatever energy he had left into practicing. He religiously held onto his coffee, gloved hands trembling.

You worried for his wellbeing.

You stayed beside Elnina anyway.

Battat was a great actor - there was no way Lanino could've captured the hostile mannerisms and behaviours of the beast as well as Battat. His voice ripped through the costume, rumbling from inside like a gutteral snarl whenever he spoke. You realized when you two practiced in private, he wasn't putting raw emotions into it. Here, he was. Even during tender scenes, his voice was rough, intense.

You were captivated.

Whenever he was offstage, you sat in involuntary anticipation of being back on stage with him. Elnina squeezed your hand reassuringly whenever you two were about to go back up.

Listening to Lanino, as Lumière, prod "Beast" into telling you the truth hurt you more than it did any of the times you'd practiced. Your jaw was taut.

Then, the ballroom dance. You'd gotten changed, and stepped into the spotlight - glimmering under the warm stagelights.

The beast's jaw was slightly agape - enough so that, as you approached, you could see his eyes from inside the beast, staring helplessly at you as you bowed at each other and linked arms. You'd never practiced the dance with his costume on, so it was a little awkward.

He offered you his hand.

You gingerly took it in a sunflower yellow glove, glittering from the light.

If you didn't know any better, you'd have sworn you heard him sharply inhale.
You rested your arm over his, and a large paw held your back. It was more comfortable when he was just a Pippins holding you, you thought. The massive paw took up most of your back. You both moved slowly, hesitantly - you for the sake of letting him adjust to the costume, and him for... well, his balance was a bit awkward. He never fully tripped, but he stumbled and wobbled just a bit, adjusting to his temporary form still. The dance was awkward in the massive suit, especially for the first time. You imagined if you were on talking terms, he'd have probably wanted you to help him practice.

Too bad, you thought sourly, glaring at his chest.

You never felt worse about being cast as the romantic leads when you had to act out crying over his dying body, the lights dimming to near black as Shadowguys came to take the costume away, unzipping Battat so he could slip out the back of the costume. And then, his real body being back in your arms.

His costume, as the freshly revived prince, was loose ragged pants, and a puffy dress shirt, almost fully unbuttoned. And you had to press yourself against him, AND passionately kiss him.

Your eyes met as your lips locked, and you quickly shut them again. He mouthed something against your lips that you didn't quite understand. He held you tighter than what was likely necessary, in your opinion.

Your head spun and you felt like you were sleepwalking through every single scene with him, but especially after the kiss. Nothing screwed you up more than that. It was the closest proxmity you had to him every time, and it had to be an incredibly intimate act. Your body felt hot with twisted, conflicting feelings every time - despair, pain, lust (that you weren't very proud of), sorrow, passion.

You both could, easily, go for a fake stage kiss, and yet you both chose not to.

The final scene, and Mr. Tenna was clapping his hands. These dress rehearsals, and there'd be a few of them, as Mr. Tenna nitpicked and tried to perfect everything, were going to be egregiously drawn out. You dreaded it. You couldn't blame Mr. Tenna - he had no idea what was going on. You weren't even that mad that he'd chosen you as the understudies for the romantic leads. Two unique Pippinses, of opposite colours, that as far as he was aware, had a unique chemistry too. You'd have made that choice too, if you were in his shoes.

You got back into your normal red and black clothes and quickly made your way over to the Weather Duo.

"You're so strong, red velvet," Elnina sighed. "Kissing him? Every time? Ohh, I wouldn't have the stomach,"

"I only barely do." You replied somberly. "I sometimes wish I was just... a fucking teacup, or whatever."

She pursed her lips tightly, and squeezed her eyes shut. She looked away.

"Nina..." you began.

She was trembling.

"Nina."

"I'm sorry!" She burst, howling with laughter. "The situation isn't funny!! It's just you wishing to be a teacup!! It was really good delivery," she wheezed. You exhaled a laugh through your nose.

Before everyone filed out for the night to retire to hang out in their desired spaces, you found Battat again.

You tapped his shoulder.

He turned before seeing you, and froze.

"We need to talk," you said.

"We do. Yeah." His gaze wandered behind you and intently stayed there.

You frowned. You didn't know what to say.

"We can... go somewhere private?"

"Sounds good."

"Where?"

"Uh... come."

He turned on his heel and stalked off, only occasionally casting back a glance to make sure you were following. It was clear he was nervous: moving quickly, shoulders tense, fists shoved in his pockets, he seemed like any unexpected movement would send him running.

He lead you to the stairs, and down two floors.

The underground parking lot.

"Literally nobody comes here, Tenna doesn't even anymore." He explained nervously.

"Mm." You acknowledged.

"So, uh. Talk."

"Yeah."

You both stood awkwardly.

It was killing you both, surely.

"Just, sit down, it's just a talk." You sat down on a curb and forced a smile up at him.

He forced a smile back and sat a couple feet in front of you, crossing his legs. Your knees were drawn up in front of you.

"I am hurt," you began.

"I know-"

"No, you really don't," you interrupted calmly. "I've been crying all the damn time over you."

He swallowed thickly.

"I don't know why you did it."

He stared at the ground, his claws dug into his legs. "You wouldn't get it."

"What makes you say that?"

"You just- you wouldn't. I have to be me, and Mike, always. I don't even know."

"But why didn't you tell me-"

"Because it didn't concern you-"

"It did when you took me out!" You shot back. "You can say it doesn't concern me til your face turns blue, but it absolutely does when you rope me into it-"

His voice raised in defense. "I couldn't do it as me-"

"Why?"

"Because, I just-"

"I would've said yes to you," you growled. "If you asked me. As you. I'd have gone on that date with you, gladly, you didn't have to fucking decieve me."

He froze. His expression was unreadable.

"I just don't understand why you couldn't tell me-"

"I can't tell anyone," he snapped.

You lowered your voice again. "Why not me?"

"If too many people know, the whole thing is jeopardized," his voice was strained. "This place running smoothly falls on my shoulders. I was foolish to want anything for myself."

He stood up to leave, but your claws instinctively shot out like lightning to grab him. He froze, but he stared away from you.

"What do you mean by that," you whispered.

"I was foolish," he repeated, slowly. "To want anything. For myself."

"Like-"

"You."

"Me?!"

"I didn't want to tell you like this."

Anger boiled in you for a moment, flashing as you sputtered in disbelief. "Wh- like THIS? How else were you going to tell me?! How long was it before you popped off your stupid fucking costume to tell me I wasn't being a weirdo for having feelings for two guys and it was all just you!"

"You had- me? Feelings-"

"Yes, I already said that a few seconds ago," you spat. "Believe it or not, I don't like feeling like I'm beginning to cheat on your alter ego because your stupid ass was giving me butterflies! But now I just- I hate you, you hurt me so bad," your voice cracked toward the end, tears threatening to spill.

He shook underneath your claws.

"I'd hate me, too." He sounded defeated.

"I don't- I-"

"'s fine."

You both stayed still. The only sounds that could be heard for several moments was the two of you struggling to keep your breathing under control. You wanted to take that "I hate you" back, but shame quickly washed over you. You didn't really hate him. You were angry, and firmly so, but you didn't hate him. In fact, the opposite.

"Who else knows?"

"Wh-"

"I know you're not the only Mike."

He stood silently. "Pluey. And our friend Jongler. Please don't say-"

"I won't rat them out," you interrupted him. "I wouldn't even do it if it was just you."

Silence hung between you two.

"Just..." you whispered. "I don't even know why you couldn't tell me."

He swallowed heavily. "I don't really know either."

You let go of his poncho, and he walked away.

You sat alone in the underground for a while, hugging your knees tightly, and cried. You didn't know how things could go back to normal from this.

You finally stood, and shambled to the stairs. You pushed open the door quietly, praying not a soul could see nor hear you. You froze when you heard voices.

"Den why not tellem, boss?"

"I don't know!" Battat's voice defensively snapped back. "Wait- who was that?"

"Plues," the other voice spoke again. "Can you sees what dat was? Boss- you're not moving a muscle."

They were in here? It had to have been over an hour since your talk with Battat failed miserably. Why on earth were they in here?

Pluey sped down the stairs, and you quickly motioned for him to shh. You frantically mouthed "I'm not here!! I'm. Not! Here!!"

He thankfully got the memo. He nodded, his wicked grin returning, and sped back upstairs.

"Was dere anyone?" The voice asked again. "Okay. See boss? Nobody."

"No, no, there was someone downstairs-"

"And theys not in here. Plues said so."

You pressed yourself against the wall. You secretly thanked Pluey a million times over in your head as you eavesdropped.

"I jus' don't think yous should be hiding things if you love them," the voice scolded Battat. "I'm sure they'd hear you out."

"Probably," Battat was hard to hear. You had to strain to catch what he was saying. "... ve fucked up enough,"

"Aww, boss. Dat's not true."

"Yes it is!"

A toot from Pluey.

"Methinks communication's key, boss,"

"And I'm bad at it!"

"But yous is Motormouth Mike. Is he bad at talkin'?"

"No, but that's different, he can-"

"But yous IS Motormouth Mike," the voice interrupted him again. You wondered if it was a Zapper. "Everything you do as him is just... you. And yous a good talker."

Another trill, sounding like agreement, came from Pluey. It sounded like they had to be two or three floors above you, but the sound travelled loudly in the stairways.

"You care for them, right?"

"Hahaaa... don't say it like that. Please."

"Well, does you?"

"... More than anything."

A firm musical trill.

"Plues is right, boss."

You wished you knew what Pluey said.

"Yous should make things right," the voice went on. "If they likes you, and you likes them, it shouldn't be too bad." Their voice tilted optimistically.

"I JUST made things worse, dumbass!"

"So?"

Silence.

"So?!! So?? They'll never forgive me!" Battat's voice rose defensively. "Why would they ever forgive me when I'm a- I'm a lying piece of-" his voice broke down.

"Boss..."

You listened, your heart competing with Battat's choking on sobs on which sound would ring louder in your ears. Your hand covered your own mouth as you listened.

"There, there, boss..."

"Th-they. They hate. Me. And they're not wrong," he sounded strangled. "I'd hate me too-"

Warbles of comfort from Pluey, in soft low tones, as if someone was playing it gently from a speaker.

"I'm sure dey don't hate you, boss." The voice reassured. "Yous should make things right, though." You heard a bit of shuffling. "Look me in the eyes, boss."

"Yous gonna be okay. Make things right."

"I... I don't know how," he croaked.

You wished so badly to go up there and try again, but you decided to let them have their moment of privacy. There had to be a reason Pluey didn't sell you out, beyond your panicked begging. You'd have understood if the Shadowguy had gone right back up there and told them you were there. You were sure Battat didn't want you hearing this.

"Leave a note, tell them how you feel." The voice was calm. "Yous is a good talker. Talk as yourself. You know how you spill as Modern-"

"Motormouth,"

"Right right, modern-"

"Ugh."

"How you spill as him, jus'... spill as yous. You does Tenna's therapy, for gloob's sake," the voice reasoned.

"I'm definitely not certified to be doing therapy." A weak chuckle from Battat. You wondered if he was finally wiping his eyes.

"Well, yous does it, and he hasn't torn da place down, now has he?"

"Right..."

"Yous emotionally smart, boss, when you wanna be. Get rest and talk to 'em."

A jazzy warble sounded in agreement.

"I won't rest well, but... Jon, Pluey... I-I," his voice wobbled again. He took a moment to steady himself. "I don't... know what I'd do without you dumbasses." Despite the insult, you could hear the smile returning to his voice. "Sorry for all my bullshit..."

"Awww, boss, bring it in-"

Shuffling and embarassed sputters from Battat echoed from above you. "Okay okay OKAYYY okayokayokay GUYS stop squeezin' me like that! Jeez!! I love you too, damn! Let's head back, then..."

"Sure thing, boss."

A melodic purr.

Footsteps, and the door opened, and slammed shut.

You stayed there for a few moments, not sure what to do. You decided to wait a few more minutes before jogging up to the next floor, and exited there. You'd take the elevator to avoid suspicion.

Chapter 11: The note

Chapter Summary

Two updates within a short time frame. Readers I love you soooo bmuch.

You made your way to the sixth floor.

You walked to the door covered in clouds and moons.

You gave a little rhythmic knock.

Lanino opened the door, and eagerly ushered you inside. "Oh! Dearie! Elnina will be so-"

"Is that a guest?!" You could already hear her excitement. "RED VELVET! MY LITTLE CLOUD!!"

You give a shuddery laugh and skipped in the direction of her voice, but not before thanking Lanino for letting you in.

"What brings you?!" Her sapphire eyes lit up. She had paused her video game for you - you glanced up at the screen. It was some bright 2D Mario game. It looked fun, you thought, before remembering what you came for.

"Boy problem update," you blurted.

"Ohh! This is serious!" She gasped. "Lanino, sunshine, can you please grab us some drinks?"

You laughed, and climbed over the back of the couch to slide down beside her.

"I tried talking to him," you started.

"You did?!" She exclaimed. "How did that go?!"

"Terrible, look at my eyes," you weakly laughed. "Super red and swollen. Sucks big time. He sucked. But I did too."

She frowned, tilting her head. "You seem happier, though?"

You nodded, your expression contorted. "Mixed bag. I'd sat up there for a bit, before I went into the stairs and I heard his friends confronting him-"

"Did they finally beat him?!" She raised her fists playfully like a boxer. "Knock him SQUARE in the-"

"No?! No," you laughed. "But I heard them talking to him."

She nodded encouragingly, and leaned forward expectantly.

Your lip quivered. "I- they told him to make things right, and try talking to me again soon, I think."

Her lips made a little O shape as she listened. "Are you gonna forgive him?!"

"If he has a good enough excuse, maybe," you tittered.

"Do you miss him?"

You fell silent. You nodded, tears spilling.

"Ohhh, doll..." she pulled you into her arms.

"I told him I hated him," you confessed. "I shouldn't have. I wish I didn't."

"How did he react?" She gently rubbed your shoulders, her silly demeanour gone.

"He said he would, too," you sniffled into her shoulder.

You heard Lanino come in, before backing away quietly.

"Aww... I think he understands you're upset, and saying things you don't mean." She rubbed little circles into your shoulders. "When you talk again, you should apologize. He will understand."

You nodded, trembling into her blue and white shirt.

"But only AFTER he apologizes for everything else!" She teased, gently slapping your back twice. "You weren't mad for no reason, dear!"

You held her tight as she gently rocked you. "You've been like. An anchor to me," you mumbled. "Thank you."

"Oh, velvet... I'm glad you can feel safe with us," she cooed. "I'm also glad it sounds like he's got his own crew helping him..." she pulled back to look at you. "Could you imagine that doofus continuing at the pace he is?!"

You giggled, and she went on.

"Oh, imagine he wears the Mikey costume," she puffed. "How mad would that be?"

"I'd kill him," you laughed, wiping your eyes. "But an attempt was made, right...?"

"Better an attempt than none," she wagged her finger at you playfully. "Did he sound like he missed you?"
"Aahhh," you wheezed. "His friend asked if he cares about me and he quoted his own damn character."

She smiled reassuringly. "He probably feels the same way, then."

You stayed with her and Lanino for a few hours. They probably intentionally gave you a few too many drinks, you considered as you found yourself giggling at everything, unable to walk in a straight line. You were grateful, though.

They ordered a pizza. A Shadowguy delivered it and tooted as he left.

Lanino walked you home after dinner.

"I heard some," he spoke in a hushed voice. "It'll be alright."

"Thanks, Lanino." You smiled up at the moon.

"I know how some men are," he chuckled. "Not very bright. It sounds like maybe he just doesn't know how to handle it. Wait for him to come to you and finally clear your skies. Sounds like it'll be any time now." He squeezed your shoulder reassuringly. You wondered who learnt that from who - if that was something Elnina did that he picked up on, or the other way around. In any case, you were relieved that he was just as reassuring as his wife was. He waited patiently for you to unlock the door, before waving a goodbye and wishing you a goodnight. He was already at the elevator by the time your door was open. He waved again and called another goodnight before he stepped inside.

You sorely missed the green idiot who'd lean against the wall and take too long to say goodbye.

His companion's words rung in your mind as you flicked the lights on.

You locked the door, and beelined for your shower.
After stumbling out, you made your way to your bed. You were too lazy to get dressed in pajamas this time. You only cared to put on your bedtime gloves, as to not rip your sheets, opened the curtain and crawled into bed.

You fell asleep as you watched the snow fall.

You dreamt of someone making snow angels with you, laughing with you. You couldn't see his face, but you didn't need to.

You woke the next day.

You forgot you were naked - you quickly dug for your clothes, gritting your teeth at the chill. Your head hurt a little, but thankfully not too much. They made sure you were eating and drinking water between drinks, you just were a lightweight. You'd appreciated the Weather Duo taking such good care of you, so you wracked your mind for ways to pay them back somehow. They deserved something nice and you wanted so badly to finally express your gratitude beyond just words. Maybe a cake? Who knew. You'd need to pay closer attention to what treats they enjoyed instead of just sitting on their couch and crying.

You made your way downstairs.

You changed into costume, and became Belle, at least for a few hours.

You were grateful you weren't the only one who stayed in costume over lunch - Pippinses, Shadowguys, and Zappers dressed as furniture and cutlery and villagers filled the tables in the cafeteria. You picked a Greek salad for lunch - refreshing, but also less likely to mess up your costume. In any case, you were still careful to tuck a napkin by your collar and spread it on your lap.

Someone got on the stool beside you.

You didn't need to turn your head to hear him order, and see his claws nervously fidgeting beside you.

Neither of you spoke to each other.

Nerves chewed you up, so you stayed silent.

You watched him pick at a rice bowl - he ate less like he was hungry and more like he was doing it out of obligation. Still, you pretended not to see. But him sitting beside you felt... reassuring, in a way you couldn't explain.

You sat there a while longer after you finished your meal. You had no reason to linger. You'd already paid. But you didn't want to move yet. The Pippins manning the cafeteria gave you a free refill on your drink.

When he finished, you finally got up. You stood awkwardly and waited for him to pay, before he got up, too.

Wordlessly, you walked back to the rehearsals together, and split off once inside - you to the weather duo, him in isolation.

"Are you two talking yet?" Elnina whispered.

"No... but he came to sit beside me? If that counts."

"No, that doesn't count." Smiling gently, she adjusted your costume. "But baby steps, I suppose?"

You nodded.

Elnina was finally walking mostly normally again - she still had to be a bit tender and avoid dancing too much, but it was nice seeing her floating around like her old self again. "I'm not sure when the final performance is," she murmured, adjusting your apron. "Tennie's been really meticulous about the Be Our Guest song..."

"No kidding. Think it's his favourite part."

"Golly, is it ever." She tapped her cheeks in thought. "I guess it's my favourite part, too! Like, I was totally excited when I was first cast as the lead, but then I got to sing along to the guest

song and like. I really liked that more! I get to be sillier," she shot you a mischevious grin. You returned it.

"Yeah, eh?" You hopped onto a box beside her. "I guess it's fine if Mr. Tenna makes us practice a million times. I'm still having fun with everyone. Despite... y'know."

She nodded. "I think I'm a very sexy feather duster. The best there ever was."

You sputtered a laugh, which evoked her boisterous laughter.

In the corner of your eye, you spotted Battat. He didn't avert his gaze this time. He seemed almost curious.

By the end of the day, Battat had left early. You tried not to care.

You hung around and chatted with the other Pippinses. The more you hung around them, the more it reminded you of your brothers and sisters.

"Ugh dude I got the gnarliest headache."

"No kidding. S'posed to snowstorm in a coupla days, that's probably why. Air pressure n all. Night of the performance..."

"So is that why the old man is making it a live broadcast?"

"When does he NOT live broadcast, idiot?"

You stood silently, listening.

"Didja see Mike? He's been running all over."

"Which one, hahaha,"

"Kinda glad they're doing this play thing though, I was getting sick of the news..."

"The news is fine, really, as long as Tenner's does more of these plays, I'm happy..."

"He really should do CATS next-"

"No, Grease!"

You snuck away after a bit. The Pippinses were a fun bunch when they weren't up to real mischief - drinking and gambling held little appeal to you. At least not in the way they hosted it. But they were good company. They often bickered and were, easily, the most... verbose group in TV World. Any table or gathering of them usually meant an array of exchanged opinions and discussions. They were an incredibly witty, too - stray comments here and there always had you biting your lip trying not to laugh. They often tried to differentiate themselves, by making small moderations to their uniforms - one wore sunglasses, another a visor. One wore a red bow instead of a tie and another swapped the red tie for a black one. Mr. Tenna, you noticed, didn't seem to care if they altered the uniforms, as long as they did

their jobs. If it weren't for the gold shimmer in your darker, velvety red, you'd have probably blended in a little more. Yet, you were still from a different set.

You made your way home after, deciding you were more invested in the frozen veggie lasagna in your freezer you'd yet to touch than you were in feeling sociable. You unlocked your door with a low sigh when something by your feet caught your eye. Crouching down, you reached for it and picked it up.

Neat and tidy handwriting on a small note. "I'd like to talk. Please sit beside me at lunch again tomorrow and we'll discuss a place. I'm sorry again."

You folded it immediately and pocketed it.

"All I've wanted." You whispered into nothingness.

The shitty frozen veggie lasagna tasted incredible with hope finally back on your heart.

The next day rolled by quickly. You'd begun losing track of the days - every day was a copy of the last, with different emotions attached. The hours crawled by and while you and Battat were interacting on the stage floor, you eagerly anticipated lunch.

You had pulled Battat's note from your pocket and showed Elnina. Her eyes lit up.

"Are you going?!"

"Is that even a question?" You tilted your head.

"Ohh, look at you," she purred, cheeks brightening at the prospect. "You're excited to talk to your other half again...!"

"Wh- he's not my other half!" You balked. "I just. Want to know! That's all!!"

She giggled. "You two finally getting along again will, like, be better romance than the actual play-"

You shoved her shoulder. "Just whose side are you on?!"

"Love is my favourite forecast, y'know!" She giggled.

You groaned.

It was fine, though, really. You didn't mind her teasing - you knew deep down, she was just excited for things to finally go well for you. It'd been a heavy week, and you'd had little time to recouperate. Her optimism kept you afloat. The stairway conversation between Battat and his friends had ended up reassuring you and placating you. If he wanted to finally talk to you, and open up truthfully, you knew you'd accept whatever came your way. As long as it was sincere, at least. More than anything you missed him. His scowls, his crude humour, his sarcasm, the subtle ways he'd show he cared... it couldn't have been faked, right? He must've

meant it when he said he'd been having feelings for you...? Mr. Tenna played Matchmaker when he put you two together, and in a cruel twist of fate, your own romance of drama and pain had played out behind the scenes. Falling in love with one face just to see the real one below it... except, unlike Beast, he didn't appear to have a witch curse him into being Mike.

Yet, something small nagged you. The way he spoke about Mike. Like he had to constantly be Mike, he couldn't have a life outside Mike, yet he had two more Mikes... maybe they were to take some of the load off his shoulders - it was easy to see why. Mike had to be Mr. Tenna's shadow. Mike had to run the show to keep it smoothly running. Mike had to run at Mr. Tenna's every beck and call. All the while, Battat still had to show up. Because of course: everyone would ask where the green Pippins went if he just became Mike full time. You worried that, even with help, he probably was overworked. The memory of him looking exhausted and worn thin even the day you met haunted you sometimes if you let yourself think about it too much.

Then another thought gnawed at you: if he just told you, you'd have done everything in your power to help. Anything. Even if it was just letting him catch a nap as Battat and covering for him. Or fetching refreshments. Or giving him a place to take shelter after a long day, a place to be himself. Anything.

It hurt still, you realized, you just weren't angry anymore. Hearing him cry had a bad affect on you. You really wanted things to be... not like it was before. But something better.

You practically ran to the cafeteria. You'd ordered egg and tuna sandwiches - funeral food, one Pippins had previously joked to you. They were right, but you just wanted something quick to eat. Maybe you could consider this a funeral for this awful week. You ordered two lemonades, met with a raised eyebrow from the Pippins at the counter.

You hadn't bothered looking for Battat until you had your lunch. You peered around, and spotted him at a table by himself in the furthest corner.

Target spotted.

Gathering everything and tossing some points on the counter, you practically skipped over to him. Still, you remained silent. You simply offered him a lemonade, much to his surprise.

"Oh, uh, thanks. How'd you know?"

"You seem like the type to like sour stuff." You chewed into an egg sandwich. "I remember you talkin' 'bout brining yourself to death with pickles." You tapped a red gloved claw on the side of your head as you spoke.

He snorted. "Right. Forgot you paid me so much attention." He tried to sound cool, but the sheepish excitement at your presence was inching through his facade.

"So, uh..."

"It's like, perpetual winter outside," he commented.

"Mhmm.. it helps me sleep."

"Huh?" He asked.

"Like- uh- ugh, I just. Y'know. I sleep better watching the snow fall. Thought you knew this."

"When the heck would I learn that?!"

"Night we met. You were... him."

He paused. "Ohh. Wow, I'm stupid." He snorted. "You told me you came from a snowy place and cried. I shoulda put two and two together that you'd like watching the snow. I was just... a bundle of nerves."

He flushed and stared down at his lemonade - a small peace offering from you.

"I wanted to ask, actually. If we could actually go outside and talk. Like. On a walk. Outside. Tonight. Together. In the snow. If that's fine-"

"Yes." You interrupted. "More than fine."

His eyes cautiously lit up. "I'll... try... to explain," he choked. "I just. It's a little hard."

You nodded encouragingly.

"You don't have to forgive me," he stated. "But I'd still like to try explaining myself. As long as you let me, please. That's the last thing I'll ever ask of you."

"It's a date, then."

He kicked you under the table.

"A date is NOT me making an idiot of myself a second time, round two frozen boogaloo," he hissed. Yet, a wide smile took over his face.

You laughed.

You missed him so much.

Chapter 12: Reconciliation

Chapter Summary

FINALLY!!!

One more chapter:)

You pushed open the front door to the TV World building.

When you showed up here, you'd fallen and landed in a random hallway. You didn't... even realize there was a front door - nor did you care to ever actually check it out when you understood this Dark World was still inside Asriel's home. So you'd never bothered to step outside, aside from the one date with Mike.

You never saw a need to. You just decided to try and adjust to what was thrown at you. Adapt, move forward, keep yourself busy.

You sorely missed your family, your friends, but begun making connections here that you'd equally sorely miss if not more, now. Maybe that was part of growing up.

TV world had streetlights surrounding the building. There was a particularly large curved pull-in that split off to an underground parking lot.

Battat was to meet you outside, so you stepped out towards the curb - just under a street light and took in the view.

There was supposed to be a major snowstorm coming. The other Pippinses complained of the air pressure shift from the oncoming storm - resulting in headaches among a few. Easily, you understood their struggle, for your head ached some too. Not a lot, but just enough to know the weather was shifting to a more severe turn. You wondered how TV World was going to have guests in these conditions.

You turned sharply at the sound of the front door opening. Battat slunk outside, eyes locked down at his phone. You were thankful that, despite your poor vision, Pippinses bright and shiny heads were very easy for you to spot. It was easy to tell when the light on him shifted that he spotted you - he quickly made his way over to you. You giggled when he stumbled, turning into laughter when he caught you and shouted, "don't laugh!" And continued to make his way to you.

"Hey," he breathed when he finally caught up. "Finally. Forgot how cold it was, so I layered up," he motioned at himself awkwardly. "I-uh- if you're cold you can borrow like. Anything. Of mine. If it uh. Y'know-"

He cut himself off before waving his hands in front of him. "Okay okay okay OKAYY it doesn't matter just. Lemmeknowifyourecold." He huffed awkwardly.

"Will do." You nodded, awkwardly looking at your feet.

"Great."

"Cool."

"Yeah."

Silence hung between the two of you until he spoke again.

"Let's like, walk." He awkwardly offered his elbow. "Makes it easier to chat when moving."

You tilted your head. "Why are you offering me... your elbow...?"

"Linking up," he explained, cheeks turning emerald. "If I fall, so do you. If you fall, so do I."

"Buddy falling system," you snorted. "Love that for us."

"Yeah yeah. If I break my butt, so do you. Then Tenna will play Beauty AND the Beast."

You broke out laughing and linked your arm through his. It felt so natural.

He set the pace - despite your similarity in height, his legs were just a couple inches longer. He naturally strode faster than you. So you found yourself secretly elated he chose a slower pace. You both said nothing for a little while. Just slowly treading through the snow - the mysteriously already-shoveled paths. You wondered who was coming out here to do that, or if this particular dark world just... did that on its own.

"So..." he began, clearing his throat. "I'm sorry."

When you didn't immediately respond, he rushed to continue.

"I really... don't know when I planned to tell you. I just knew I had already dug a hole the night we were in Cyber City together," he breathed. "I thought I should've revealed myself then. But like... I was scared of rejection. I guess."

"I wouldn't have-"

"No, no, that's not the point, I know that now," he quickly rushed. "The point was just that I was scared."

You hummed in acknowledgement, deciding to let him speak.

"I do this whole Mike thing for Tenna. But he doesn't know."

You frowned. "I figured something like that... but... why?"

"He's always calling for Mike," Battat began. "But like... nobody's ever there. Nobody ever responds, he goes to Mike's room and nobody's there of course, and he'd take it out on all of us. He's got severe abandonment issues, y'know, it's a long story.

So one day, I decided, I was sick of it. He'd get drunk, cry, yell at us, be... well, glooby, for the rest of the day. Don- don't make that face! He'd never intentionally hurt us!" He squeezed your arm tighter. "He just... he's got issues, s'all. I was in charge of the costume department at the time. So I gathered as much information on Miks as I could. I'd lost so much sleep, haha. I prowled everything. I asked around. I dug into his VHS archives. I couldn't find shit on this Mike guy. So I put together a costume and became Mike. And he believed it! As long as there was someone claiming to be Mike, he's happy. So I kept it up. This was a couple years back, though, I've been doing this for a long time..." he sighed. "But there was... SO much to do as Mike. So Pluey and Jon decided to help me. Because it was killing me to do it by myself. But even still, I can't... keep up sometimes. I'm the 'favourite' Mike. I talk back, I sing, I do his therapy, allathat. They want Pippinses to do everything here - so I had the skillset, I guess. But I lost myself."

You said nothing - you let him open up, patiently. You opted to just gently squeeze his arm as he spoke.

"Mike became a comfortable mask." He stared off absently. "It's easier to talk to people. But of course... I shouldn't let anyone get suspicious, right? So I let myself be the standoffish asshole, while Mike is the guy with the show stopping smile, the large friendly personality. Mike's the man with the plan. The man who never shuts up. The guy who can yap Tenna's antennae off and calm him down when his mental issues arise. Again! He's not a bad guy. Just... unwell."

"He seemed nice..." you frowned.

"He is, really," Battat reassured. "He's a sweetheart. But he freaks out if he thinks he's been abandoned again. So he turns into a real control freak. He does it outta fear, though, he calms down if you tell him you're not leaving. But I think I got him to a place where he's better than he was when I started this whole Mike schtick." He pursed his lips. "But then you came along..."

You inhaled a little sharper than you'd intended.

"I couldn't just... tell you," he admitted. "I liked you basically rightaway. Soft spot for other weird Pippinses, you know the deal." He shot you a crooked smile, his forest eyes twinkling under the streetlights as you passed by. "But I could tell you liked... Mike. And I couldn't keep acting like Mike around you, out of costume. The real me is somewhere in the middle... And I couldn't tell you because I didn't know if you'd tell anyone. Or freak out."

He shuddered a sigh. "But it was wrong. I played into it. I shoulda just told you. I knew the moment I asked you I fucked up."

You nodded.

He was leading you in a circle around TV World, you noted, as you both rounded the corner of the behemoth of a building.

"I really don't know when I planned to tell you," he admitted, coming to a stop. "I just wanted to savour every moment. But then the shit with the play... we kept getting closer and I knew I was in sooo much shit," he laughed weakly. He rubbed his forehead. "I really wanted to tell you. I really did. Do you know how badly I wished our first kiss wasn't on a dumbass costume head? Or during rehearsal? Real bleak shit."

"We can... fix that," you offered nervously.

"Wh- no, no no I wasn't asking- like that'd be nice but like I wasn't asking-"

"I know. I'm offering," you gave a weak smile.

"Even after all this?" He croaked.

"Well, lemme talk a bit," you started.

You waited a moment, and he nodded. You tugged on his arm to encourage walking together again.

"When I showed up here. Well. You know I was scared."

He hummed. "Screamin' scared."

You exhaled a laugh through your nose. "Yeppers. Big scared. You comforted me as Mike," humming nervously, you stared forward at the snow billowing softly around you both. "I felt... safe with you, first. As Mike. When I met you as you, I thought you hated me."

He chuckled. "My bad."

You shook his arm. "No shit! I was like oh here's this guy, he's different like me, he thinks I'm a DUMBASS. He's cute and looks PISSED at me. I gotta get away from him,"

He laughed.

"Anyways, time passes. Quickly. And I find myself getting butterflies. You and Mike share a cackle, y'know. I remember the night Elnina fell and you held me in the elevator."

He sharply inhaled.

"And you shielded me from others staring," you added. "I remembered all of it." His arm squeezed yours a bit tigher. "When we were cast together, I thought you still hated me. So I was horrified. But then you wanted to be friends." You rasped. "I was... relieved. You were still cold as ice and Elnina was already teasing me about you,"

"S-she was?! Seriously?! That cheeky dweeb?" He huffed.

"Yeah, it was pretty funny, actually," you laughed. "She drove me kinda insane. In a good way, in a good way!! But I was in denial. Since the first time we hung out in the stairs. You stayed at my door and took too long to say goodbye and I didn't reallywannasaygoodnighteither-"

"I didn't want to at all," he confessed, face emerald as he decided to be more bold. "I woulda stayed up with you all night if you asked."

"That'd be terrrrrible," you groaned. "I can't just. Stay up with any guy who asks!"

He bursted out laughing, the sound bouncing off the snow. "True!"

"But I liked Mike and was quickly liking you. I felt like some kinda weirdo. A tiger on the prowl," you eyerolled. "All your fault."

"Okay you're right. Maybe I should've spoken up," he laughed sheepishly.

You shook him gently. "Yeah! Fuckin eh! Now you're seeing that?!"

"I was scared you hated me too!"

"No!! Dude, oh my god. I was kicking myself for even being a little excited at being in a romantic lead with you." You dragged your free hand down your face. "I was like ohh he hates me so much but he's kinda cute and he gets to hold me ouuhhh delightfully devilish pleasures-"

He burst out laughing. "Is that a reference to something?!"

"Yeah," snickering in response, yet you bumped your head into his shoulder. "I'll show you later."

"Please," Battat tried to control his laughter. "Anyways go on,"

"Thank ya. Anyways, you took me on that date. I was so worried because you were being so... cryptic."

He groaned. "Yeah. I knew I fucked up then."

"I'd have gone with you if you asked me as... you. Battat."

"Would you really?"

"Yeah," you confessed. "I would've jumped at any point for you, if you asked. Even if I thought you hated me. I'd have taken... any crumbs to get along."

He squeezed you, and you both continued walking.

"I'm. Glad we're finally talking," he breathed. "The last several days sucked. Plues and Jon were close to sending me to Cyber City inpatient," he laughed dryly. "I lost sleep."

"I'm grateful clouds are familiar with rain," you joked back. "I think if you wrung out Elnina's couch, it'd still drip in my tears."

"Oh god," he snickered. "I should personally apologize to her and Lanino, too, then."

"I don't know if that's necessary, but-"

"You're right. You're my first priority."

Your heart thundered, cheeks heating up faster than the snow could cool.

"Wait!" You gasped. He turned to look with wide eyes.

"I'm sorry I said I hated you," you spoke quickly, nerves threatening to clam you up and tears suddenly threatening. "I didn't mean it-"

"I know you didn't-"

"No but I still said it," you gasped. "It was bad. I shouldn't have said it, I never hated you- I was just so- so hurt- I was-"

He quickly unlinked your arms and yanked you into a hug. He realized what he did, because he sharply inhaled. Then held you tighter.

"I get it, though," he whispered. "I'd hate me too. I'm glad you don't in any case. I'd forgive you every time even if you said it hourly."

"Ough," you groaned, tears already forming. "I couldn't..."

He held you there, under the falling snow. Neither of you spoke for a while.

Your heart already felt so much lighter and you hoped his, did, too. You wanted this so, so badly. This was the outcome you desperately yearned for.

"That first rehearsal kiss was brutal, though," he hummed. "Broke my heart for the first time."

"Ughh..." the sobs won. "I loved you but I wanted to hurt you back... it was stupid..."

"In a sick way, I enjoyed it."

You laughed through the tears. "Okay. Maybe you are sick,"

He exhaled laughter into your shoulder.

When he finally pulled back, his eyes were also red.
"Did you... make all my costumes," you asked dumbly.

He seemed startled for a moment, before apprehensively answering. "Yes... are they uncomfortable-"

"No, no, they're perfect," you quickly assured him. "I just... wanted to know."

"I'd have made them perfect for you whether or not all this shit happened," he dismissively waved a hand. "But it was my way of trying a peace offering."

You nodded.

"Wanna play?" He suddenly asked.

"Whuh?"

"Like... I think we need a break from crying," he chuckled. The green Pippins took a few steps away from you, bent over, and whipped around with a soft snowball to your chest.

"Hey! A warning would be nice!" You barked.

He laughed as you quickly dove to make your own to fire at him.

"What did you think I meant by play, dumbass?!"

"I don't know!" You squawked in embarassment. "But not shooting me with projectiles!"

He roared in laughter.

For a while, you fired snowballs at each other, panting and laughing wildly. You were both near thirty and yet you felt like children, playing in the snow, having fun. When you'd both decided you were a bit tuckered out, he took your hand.

"Wait, before we go inside," you breathed. "Can we make snow angels?"

"Sure."

You both plopped in the snow softly. Your claws interlocked - your angels would hold hands, you both decided in an unspoken agreement. You both laid in the snow for a while.

"I'm boutta ruin mine," Battat said suddenly.

"Sure," you panted, eyes shut.

You heard shuffling before lips met yours.

Your eyes popped open. He gently put a green hand on your jaw. You reached up and held his.

He pulled back momentarily. "Sorry, I just-"

"Get back here," you growled and pulled him in. "I'm not done with you,"

His laughter turned into a weak whimper as you held the back of his neck. "Can we," he panted between words. "Take this inside?"

You nodded. He stood up first and extended a hand to you. You took it gratefully.

You hurried to your floor, hand in hand. Ignoring anyone who caught sight of you both, breathlessly giggling and running. By the time you'd made it upstairs, he paused suddenly.

"I gotta... grab something from my room,"

"Oh, okay, should I like, wait here or,"

"Yeah, I'll be like, literally two seconds," he panted.

He walked a couple doors down, unlocked his door and quickly went inside. He clearly knew what he was looking for, because he emerged only a few moments later. Seemingly not holding anything.

"What'd ya grab?" You asked.

"Uh, you'll find out?"

"Is it your theory corkboard-"

"Oh my god shut UP you'd KNOW if I had that-"

"Babahaha, I'm just messing with you-"

"As you do!"

You wheezed in laughter as you pushed open the door, ushering him inside.

"I love your stupid wheezes, y'know that?" He huffed. "My favourite thing about you, I think, you got a dumb wheeze."

It only made you wheeze harder, and he broke the cooler-than-you attitude to laugh, too. "Now where were we...?"

You closed the distance and dragged him to your bed.

"Jesus," he sputtered. "I knew we were horny but like right away-?!"

"Problem, officer?" You shot him a sultry look.

"Nosirree!"

"Oh god. You're a dork."

"SAYS YOU," He choked as he threw off two layers of ponchos.

"Wow, you weren't kidding about layering up, huh," you hummed.

"Not all of us come from hockey land," he eyerolled, before his gaze turned affectionate. You took yours off and peeled off your scarf. You unbuttoned your shirt a bit before pouncing on

him.

He tugged off his gloves as your lips locked; both of you closing your eyes and savouring the taste. He gently whimpered as you straddled him to your bed. He was melting under your touch - his long claws reaching under to loosen your shirt, then his own.

You fumbled at his belt buckle, causing him to groan gently in response, hips pushing up at you. You could feel something firm - that certainly wasn't his wallet or keys. He shuffled himself back - further onto your bed, before reaching down to pull you further onto him. He tugged at your belt, silently asking for help now that his sharp claws were exposed. He didn't want to ruin your clothes. You quickly made work of undoing your belt, before hopping off him entirely to take your pants off. He took advantage of the opportunity to kick his off.

You discarded your shirt, too, for good measure, and only finally took off your gloves.

"Ugh," he sighed. "You're like. Perfect."

"Says you," you responded. He really was beautiful. The green made him stand out. Instead of the usual hues of pink and red when Pippinses blushed, he would turn a meadowy green. He was a darker, cool green. He was like eye candy to you. You hopped back on him quickly, wasting no time. "I needed you so much," you breathed as your lips met his throat.

He panted, breathless. "Me, too," his ivory claws gently raked your back. "You have no... actually. You probably have an idea- ohh... don't leave a mark, y'know- ah, ahh, okay leave as many as you'd like," his voice got higher.

He gently - then firmly - began pressing his pelvis into yours. His claws sunk to hold onto your hips as he gasped and moaned beneath you. The hardness between his legs begging to be inside.

"You're gonna ruin these underwear," you chuckled.

"Then take them off?" He tried to sound nonchalant. He failed miserably. "Or, I could help-"

You raised your hips off him and he all too eagerly tugged them down, then pulled off his own, then he suddenly glowered at you, before you had a chance to look at him.

"Get on your back," he growled greedily. You wasted no time, and spread your legs.

He quickly maneuvered to be over you. "I'm yours," he breathed, face flushed. "B-but I'd. Like to be on top right now,"

You nodded, breathing heavily, taking the view of him in. The green Pippins was overworked - but years of constantly running around, hauling shit half his size around, jumping at every beck and call made him decently toned. You caught a glimpse of his dick, hanging hungrily near you.

Now, due to the nature of their claws, Pippinses couldn't really... finger each other, at least not in the same way most other monsters and darkners could. For your kind, it was incredibly gentle clawing - an intimate, teasing, sensual gesture, rather than anything heavy handed and

quick. Pippinses couldn't break each others skin as easily as they could shred others (not unlike felines), but with non-retractable claws, they still had to be gentle when handling each other's privates. The back of the claws were ideal, but not easy to do by yourself. So it was often saved as a sensual act between lovers.

And so, gentle he was - using the back of his claws to rub against you. You melted into your sheets.

You groaned and purred in pleasure at his touch, pent up and sensitive from everything. You'd fantasized about this BEFORE things went south. The day he'd measured you had been a mental reference for your fantasies when you'd think about him running his claws down your flesh.

He could tell when you were close - his pace quickening, he greedily licked his lips as he hunched over you. Your orgasm spilled onto his hands, his own ragged breaths quickening. "I didn't know you could get creamy like that," he rasped before licking it off his claws. It turned you on more to watch.

"I- uh- first time?" You laughed.

"Not answering that," he snorted. "I'd hooked up with a Shadowguy ONCE."

"How was it?"

"Uhh... shadowy," he teased your entrance with his cock. "Never been with another Pippins before and- agh, fuck," he gasped.

You whimpered in response.
"Ah- does it hurt?" He froze.

"Just be gentle," you cautioned.

He nodded.

"If my gasps- aah- become moans, just keep going," you informed him.

"Got it," and he was already pressing himself further in.

A few times, your breath would hitch, and he'd slow down in response, before continuing at your cue. You appreciated the consideration.

Once he was fully inside, you both struggled to find a pace - but your claws sunk into the back of his neck and the other set of claws sunk into the back of his hips. You were sensitive puddles under each others grasps. He'd finally leaned over you and balanced his elbow over your head, showering your neck in licks and kisses as you desperately tried to return the favour. You both feverishly, hungrily dug into each other.

Pent up, horny, frustrated after a week of passionate stage kisses laced with intensity and storming emotions, only to find relief finally in reconciliation. And now: pulling each other apart in bed, fitting into each other like missing puzzle pieces.

And it felt incredible.

He'd occasionally pull out, panting. "J-just," between gasps, "edging..."

Before lining his dick back to your entrance and slamming back inside. You both lost track of time - until he whimpered, "I'm sorry-" and quickened his pace. The tantalizing size and pace of him only encouraged your own, and you came together, his hot fluid filling you up.

He pulled out, lost in thought before suddenly cursing. "Fuck. I'm so stupid-"

"What?"

"I brought a condom," he sighed. "I forgot to put it on. I'm sorry- ugh,"

"Shit. It's fine. We'll deal with it. If it was urgent I'd have stopped you." Your soft laughter reassured him some.

"Uuuggh... I'll go to the pharmacy after I clean up, okay?"

You nodded, relaxing. "Sounds good to me."

"But, uh..." he sat anxiously before you. "Can I..."

"Yes, you can cuddle me," you huffed, content. "Don't leave me right away, please. I just." You held out an arm, and Battat all too early crawled in. "Wanna be with you for a while, okay?"

"Okay."

You fell asleep in each other's arms.

Chapter 13: Fin

Chapter Summary

> Hi!! Finally, the last chapter. It was delayed not because I'd ever intended it to be very long, but I actually ended up having a 3 day headache. I intended for this chapter to be on the shorter side - we're wrapping things up!
>
> Thank you for indulging me as I wrote this - I didn't plan this one out too detailed, I just wrote as it came to me. I hope you stick around for my other fics.
>
> Characterizing Battat was a major task, and I hope I did a decent job. Thank you again!

Being on speaking terms with Battat again brought a skip back to your step that you never realized was gone before.

Elnina had been thrilled, citing your romance as more alluring than the actual play. "The stakes were higher," she had sniffled. She had hugged you so tight, you couldn't breathe for a moment.

Lanino had winked at you. "I told you he would come around."

The other Pippinses had gawked, before deciding they unanimously were happy for you - their standoffish, mean coworker finally had life in his eyes. That was always a plus. Now he might come to their parties if they could convince you to go, which was a much less monumental task if they caught you in a good mood. They definitely stared, a lot, though.

Pluey was elated. Tooting in delight and slapping Battat's back heavily.

"H-hey! Watch it!!" Battat frantically tried to wave him away when a Zapper's voice from behind had caught you off guard.

"Boss, looks like ya did da right thing," they sounded pleased, wiggling their head back and forth in delight. "Can they hang out withs us?"

"Sooooon," Batt groaned. "After the play?"

They seemed content with that answer.

"Pleased to finally meet youse," they delicately took your gloved claws in their absolutely massive hands. "Boss has told us many good things-"

"oOOOKAY that's enough! That's enough! Jeez," Battat tugged you away. "We can hang out together - all of us! - at my place after the performance! But we gotta practice!" The pippins

prickled in embarassment as he shooed his friends. His cheeks were stained evergreen as he tried to hide how flustered he was.

"Ahaha, you told them about me?" You knew the answer, given you'd heard the confrontation, but it still tickled you... if Jongler was right, that meant Battat had... spoken highly of you? The thought made your heart race.

"Of course," the die pouted as he dragged you to the elevators. "I didn't think they'd just tell you, though... I just. Really. Uhh... was excited about you." He huffed through his nostrils and glared forward.

You grinned. "I told Elnina about you. She said we were 'alluring',"

"Yeah well only one of us is," he stammered quickly. "And it isn't me."

"Oh shut up!" You smacked his shoulder playfully as you stepped inside the elevators. "I was freaking out the first time I saw you."

"I'd freak out if I saw me, too," he shot you a crooked, shit-eating grin.

"Ohhh my god take the freaking compliment!!" You shook him playfully, the both of you giggling.

You got off at the Pippinses floor, and obediently followed Battat down the hall. He stopped at his door.

"Okay, so like..." he hummed anxiously. "Remember when I said you'd... Get to hear aaall about my conspiracies at level 4 friendship?"

"Am I finally closing in on level 2?"

"Wh- oh my god you're. We literally. We're literally dating. You're more than level 2 you idiot-"

"So I'm still level 1," you pouted.

He practically kicked his door open. "You're worse than me!" You could hear laughter in his tone, despite his pretend outrage. "What have I signed up for?!"

You cackled. "A lot, actually," and brushed past him into his own apartment.

It was a similar layout to yours, but far messier. Papers all over his table, a corkboard - because of course he actually had one - full of papers connected by red threads, clothes strewn about on the couch. His bed was clearly messy, even from afar. A towel hung loosely over the back of one couch - you assumed that was him running late after a shower and he forgot it there. His kitchen, at least, was tidy - you assumed there was probably an element of him not being home enough to care about eating. This was likely his bunker for sleeping and paperwork, and that was it. One cushion on the couch was basically just piles of fabric and sewing supplies on the adjacent coffee table. You'd have to bully him later about "organized chaos" still being chaos.

"Sorry my place looks like a category 5 hurricane swept through here," he huffed, eyes looking away. "I just get. Uh. Carried away. ANYWAYS!" he strode past you.

"Part of the whole Mike thing," he practically purred as he tapped the corkboard. "Is that none of us know WHO he is. I didn't figure I could ask you, since Tenna and I SAW you fall into the hallway when you came here," he pursed his lips. He seemed excited to finally get to tell you about it, you thought.

"And Tenna's never figured it out- like, that you're pretending to be Mike?" You sat on the edge of his bed.

"Not even. I just put on my best Frank Sinatra voice and hope for the best," he sighed. "I've lost soo much sleep over this shit, but, it gives me something to do."
"Why don't you just tell him-"

"'Cause he'll flip! He takes abandonment really badly - none of us know who Mike is, just that he was once here, now he isn't, and Tenna keeps referring to him. Anytime he asks for Mike to do something, either he does it himself, we do it in secret, or it just... happens! By itself! But if he ever knew that the Mike he knows here isn't real and just three dudes taking turns placating him, he'll probably like. Pop a few wire vessels! It started off as something we did just to make our work life a bit less turbulent, but then we just... kept it up, because seeing the boss happy makes is happy." He seemed embarassed to admit this, pursing his lips and frowning into nowhere in particular.

"What other things do you like theorizing on-"

"Ghosts," he had turned to face the board only to near-immediately whip back around to face you. The action caused you to jump back a bit with a laugh.

"Ghosts?!"

"Yes! TV World is haunted, I would put my life on it! But the ghosts are afraid of Tenna..."

"Why?" Amused, you prodded him more.

"Because the creepy shit never happens around him." Battat answered, adjusting his tie proudly.

"What if the ghosts are just Shadowguys?"

"Pluey would tell me! And I see him freaking out at nothing all the time!" Battat was fully engrossed in this, now. "This place is constantly filled with footsteps, squeaks, voices, things dropping, shadows that AREN'T shadowguys moving on their own!! It only makes sense! Ask any of the Pippinses - at least once a month a glass in the cafeteria breaks on its own!"

"Oh, that's actually kinda scary," your voice wavered.

"You never wondered why Pippinses usually share rooms?" He questioned, and raised a brow at you.

"This is my first time in another Pippinses room!" You squawked at him. "What do you even mean!! We're allowed to have roommates?"

"I can arrange that," he shot you a smug look. "I'm still Mike, remember? Anyways, all the other Pippinses - all the darkners here, really - usually have an unspoken buddy system in case more paranormal things happen."

You rolled your eyes and flopped onto his bed as he wandered off. He returned moments later with two cans. "Want one?"

"What flavours are they?"

"Peach and watermelon."

"Peach, please."

You extended a gloved hand and felt the cold can press against you. You sat back up and opened it.

He got comfortable on the floor, facing you. "We could practice," he muttered, putting his drink to his lips. "Or we could have fun yammering about ghosts. Or if you really loved me, you could let me.." he waved at the board behind him, putting his best wet puppy dog eyes on for you. "Give you alllll my theories."

"But the performance is tomorrow," you laughed.

"And?"

"Fiiine," you sighed dramatically. "Blow me away with all your theories." You shot him a sincere smile after, a silent encouragement.

His eyes lit up.

Hours passed - you learnt he was, indeed, very passionate about constantly having a case to crack. You learned more things about your boss than you'd ever intended to. Battat, as you learned, was a very chatty guy: he filled most of the silence effortlessly, explaining where he first heard of Mike, any mentions, how they managed to get "the mailman"'s number and tried asking him about Mike - only to be cursed off. He explained Pluey and Jongler's joining of the Mike... crew, and somehow this was totally connected to either ghosts or an alter-ego, maybe even a supernatural entity only Tenna knew about. You learnt that this, too, spawned his research into the occult and supernatural. Battat seemed incredibly pleased with himself.

Eventually, you'd both began to grow tired - he'd hopped on the bed beside you and you'd both laid on your backs as he continued to ramble, slower and slower. The next thing you knew, you were snuggled together, sleeping soundly, cheeks pressed against each others while your arms and legs were entangled, fully clothed. If heaven was real, it was in here, you thought. Sleep took you easily and peacefully, waking only when both of your alarms buzzed.

"I don't wanna get up," Battat mumbled.

"Me neither... but today's the big day," you groaned.

"I'll shower first, then... in 5 more minutes."

He sleepily planted a kiss on your cheek.

By the time you two were up and out the door, the other Pippinses were leaving their rooms, too - you could feel eyes on you, burning hot in the back of your head as you firmly held Battat's claws in yours. You didn't mind too much. He held your claws in his tighter. It was clear Battat was, at least a little, overwhelmed by the sudden attention. With your reassuring smile, he loosened up, eager to drag you to the stage rooms.

Elnina, already in costume, dramatically fanned herself and pretended to fall backwards into Lanino at the sight of you two. She and Lanino looked dazzling in their costumers, you thought, as you sped by. Battat only shot them a friendly wave. "When will you return our raincloud!" Elnina teased in a playful shout. You laughed and mouthed "knock it off!" to her as Battat dragged you along.

He helped you get ready, then sheepishly asked you to help him.

"It's kind of awkward to get in this thing," he stumbled a little. "I'm not very... y'know. Beastly."

"Only in personality." You smiled up at him before he made a face and settled inside. You zipped up the back. "Is it even comfortable in there?"

"I made sure to add ventilation this time." Came the muffled response. "Things horrible when you gotta use the washroom, though."

"Oh God, I'd bet."

"Tenna's broadcasting in 10, my suit's fine, yeah?"

"Yeah! You're lookin real scary." You beamed up at Battat through his costume.

"Great. Now can you... please help me get outta the dressing room? That's half of why I needed you here," he laughed.

"Sure."

You helped him out of the dressing room, and backstage. The darkners were buzzing with anticipation for tonight's show - despite the blizzard, Mr. Tenna was thrilled that darkners from nearby dark worlds, namely Cyber City, were still filling the audience rows. He fully intended on this being a live broadcast - a few tech support Shadowguys and a lone red Pippins manning the control room seemed to be keeping things running smoothly while the rest of you were preparing to take over the stage. Despite the oncoming blizzard that night, the amount of darkners coming to visit was enough to have Mr. Tenna in his element - he was visibly a little stressed, but he was still jittery with excitement. He was getting to host a live

event! While he wasn't going to be on stage, for once, he was evidently very proud of his directing skills - and you couldn't blame him. All the rehearsals and practices and you were certain this would make a good show.

"I'll miss this, a bit," Battat's muffled murmur came from the open jaw of his costume. "I liked getting to relax a bit from the constant tasks and errands and paperwork."

"Hmph. Yeah. I still missed out on so much training..." you thoughtfully stared at the back of the curtains. Ugh, training. You'd barely started when this all came up.

"Hey," Batt jokingly started, "at least I still get to train you. Maybe you'll be as good a worker as me." He shot you a wink.

"If we don't get distracted." You laughed and flicked the upper tooth from his costume's jaw.

"Hey!! Watch the goods!" He barked. You could hear the smile in his voice, despite only seeing the upper half of his face. "Knock one out and I'm gonna bite you!"

"You wouldn't," you affronted playfully.

"Okay, you're right. I'll save that for later."

"Shut up!!"

A Pippins came backstage. "Okay everyone, get in your places!" They locked eyes on you. "You, go beside the curtain, you're the first up!"

You looked back at Battat one last time.

He looked at you with an expression that could only be described as "soft" from him.

"Break a leg. Love you."

End Notes

I tried to tackle any grammatical errors, possible inconsistencies, but I may miss some because I'm sleep deprived with a cat who runs on 100%. Please forgive me! I bring more battatslop for you as my peace offering!

Battat will show up in the next chapter, unmasked.

I like the idea of him as Mike using pet names towards us - think of it in the same way a doctor might suddenly start calling you sweetheart and speaking softly when your test results look a little scary. He's just concerned!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!